The Ne'er−Do−Well

Rex Beach

Table of Contents

The Ne'er−Do−Well

Rex Beach

Produced by Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

TO
MY WIFE

I. VICTORY

It was a crisp November night. The artificial brilliance of Broadway was rivalled by a glorious moonlit sky. The first autumn frost was in the air, and on the side−streets long rows of taxicabs were standing, their motors blanketed, their chauffeurs threshing their arms to rout the cold. A few well−bundled cabbies, perched upon old−style hansoms, were barking at the stream of hurrying pedestrians. Against a background of lesser lights myriad points of electric signs flashed into everchanging shapes, winking like huge, distorted eyes; fanciful designs of liquid fire ran up and down the walls or blazed forth in lurid colors. From the city's canons came an incessant clanging roar, as if a great river of brass and steel were grinding its way toward the sea.

Crowds began to issue from the theatres, and the lines of waiting vehicles broke up, filling the streets with the whir of machinery and the clatter of hoofs. A horde of shrill−voiced urchins pierced the confusion, waving their papers and screaming the football scores at the tops of their lusty lungs, while above it all rose the hoarse tones of carriage callers, the commands of traffic officers, and the din of street−car gongs.

In the lobby of one of the playhouses a woman paused to adjust her wraps, and, hearing the cries of the newsboys, petulantly exclaimed:

"I'm absolutely sick of football. That performance during the third act was enough to disgust one."

Her escort smiled. "Oh, you take it too seriously," he said. "Those boys don't mean anything. That was merely Youth— irrepressible Youth, on a tear. You wouldn't spoil the fun?"

"It may have been Youth," returned his companion, "but it sounded more like the end of the world. It was a little too much!"

A bevy of shop−girls came bustling forth from a gallery exit.

"Rah! rah! rah!" they mimicked, whereupon the cry was answered by a hundred throats as the doors belched forth the football players and their friends. Out they came, tumbling, pushing, jostling; greeting scowls and smiles with grins of insolent good−humor. In their hands were decorated walking−sticks and flags, ragged and tattered as if from long use in a heavy gale. Dignified old gentlemen dived among them in pursuit of top−hats; hysterical matrons hustled daughters into carriages and slammed the doors.

"Wuxtry! Wuxtry!" shrilled the newsboys. "Full account of the big game!"

A youth with a ridiculous little hat and heliotrope socks dashed into the street, where, facing the crowd, he led a battle song of his university. Policemen set their shoulders to the mob, but, though they met with no open resistance, they might as well have tried to dislodge a thicket of saplings. To−night football was king.

Out through the crowd came a score of deep−chested young men moving together as if to resist an attack, whereupon a mighty roar went up. The cheer−leader increased his antics, and the barking yell changed to a measured chant, to the time of which the army marched down the street until the twenty athletes dodged in through the revolving doors of a cafe, leaving Broadway rocking with the tumult.

All the city was football−mad, it seemed, for no sooner had the new−comers entered the restaurant than the diners rose to wave napkins or to cheer. Men stepped upon chairs and craned for a better sight of them; women raised their voices in eager questioning. A gentleman in evening dress pointed out the leader of the squad to his companions, explaining:

"That is Anthony—the big chap. He's Darwin K. Anthony's son. You've heard about the Anthony bill at Albany?"

"Yes, and I saw this fellow play football four years ago. Say! That was a game."

"He's a worthless sort of chap, isn't he?" remarked one of the women, when the squad had disappeared up the stairs.

"Just a rich man's son, that's all. But he certainly could play football."

"Didn't I read that he had been sent to jail recently?"

"No doubt. He was given thirty days."

"What! in PRISON?" questioned another, in a shocked voice.

"Only for speeding. It was his third offence, and his father let him take his medicine."

"How cruel!"

"Old man Anthony doesn't care for this sort of thing. He's right, too. All this young fellow is good for is to spend money."

Up in the banquet−hall, however, it was evident that Kirk Anthony was more highly esteemed by his mates than by the public at large. He was their hero, in fact, and in a way he deserved it. For three years before his graduation he had been the heart and sinew of the university team, and for the four years following he had coached them, preferring the life of an athletic trainer to the career his father had offered him. And he had done his chosen work well.

Only three weeks prior to the hard gruel of the great game the eleven had received a blow that had left its supporters dazed and despairing. There had been a scandal, of which the public had heard little and the students scarcely more, resulting in the expulsion of the five best players of the team. The crisis might have daunted the most resourceful of men, yet Anthony had proved equal to it. For twenty−one days he had labored like a real general, spending his nights alone with diagrams and little dummies on a miniature gridiron, his days in careful coaching. He had taken a huge, ungainly Nova Scotian lad named Ringold for centre; he had placed a square−jawed, tow−headed boy from Duluth in the line; he had selected a high−strung, unseasoned chap, who for two years had been eating his heart out on the side−lines, and made him into a quarter−back.

Then he had driven them all with the cruelty of a Cossack captain; and when at last the dusk of this November day had settled, new football history had been made. The world had seen a strange team snatch victory from defeat, and not one of all the thirty thousand onlookers but knew to whom the credit belonged. It had been a tremendous spectacle, and when the final whistle blew for the multitude to come roaring down across the field, the cohorts had paid homage to Kirk Anthony, the weary coach to whom they knew the honor belonged.

Of course this fervid enthusiasm and hero−worship was all very immature, very foolish, as the general public acknowledged after it had taken time to cool off. Yet there was something appealing about it, after all. At any rate, the press deemed the public sufficiently interested in the subject to warrant giving it considerable prominence, and the name of Darwin K. Anthony's son was published far and wide.

Naturally, the newspapers gave the young man's story as well as a history of the game. They told of his disagreement with his father; of the Anthony anti−football bill which the old man in his rage had driven through the legislature and up to the Governor himself. Some of them even printed a rehash of the railroad man's famous magazine attack on the modern college, in which he all but cited his own son as an example of the havoc wrought by present− day university methods. The elder Anthony's wealth and position made it good copy. The yellow journals liked it immensely, and, strangely enough, notwithstanding the positiveness with which the newspapers spoke, the facts agreed essentially with their statements. Darwin K. Anthony and his son had quarrelled, they were estranged; the young man did prefer idleness to industry. Exactly as the published narratives related, he toiled not at all, he spun nothing but excuses, he arrayed himself in sartorial glory, and drove a yellow racing−car beyond the speed limit.

It was all true, only incomplete. Kirk Anthony's father had even better reasons for his disapproval of the young man's behavior than appeared. The fact was that Kirk's associates were of a sort to worry any observant parent, and, moreover, he had acquired a renown in that part of New York lying immediately west of Broadway and north of Twenty−sixth Street which, in his father's opinion, added not at all to the lustre of the family name. In particular, Anthony, Sr., was prejudiced against a certain Higgins, who, of course, was his son's boon companion, aid, and abettor. This young gentleman was a lean, horse−faced senior, whose unbroken solemnity of manner had more than once led strangers to mistake him for a divinity student, though closer acquaintance proved him wholly unmoral and rattle−brained. Mr. Higgins possessed a distorted sense of humor and a crooked outlook upon life; while, so far as had been discovered, he owned but two ambitions: one to whip a policeman, the other to write a musical comedy. Neither seemed likely of realization. As for the first, he was narrow−chested and gangling, while a brief, disastrous experience on the college paper had furnished a sad commentary upon the second.

Not to exaggerate, Darwin K. Anthony, the father, saw in the person of Adelbert Higgins a budding criminal of rare precocity, and a menace to his son; while to the object of his solicitude the aforesaid criminal was nothing more than an entertaining companion, whose bizarre disregard of all established rules of right and wrong matched well with his own careless temper. Higgins, moreover, was an ardent follower of athletics, revolving like a satellite about the football stars, and attaching himself especially to Kirk, who was too good−natured to find fault

with an honest admirer.

It was Higgins this evening who, after the "cripples" had deserted and the supper party had dwindled to perhaps a dozen, proposed to make a night of it. It was always Higgins who proposed to make a night of it, and now, as usual, his words were greeted with enthusiasm.

Having obtained the floor, he gazed owlishly over the flushed faces around the table and said:

"I wish to announce that, in our little journey to the underworld, we will visit some places of rare interest and educational value. First we will go to the House of Seven Turnings."

"No poetry, Hig!" some one cried. "What is it?"

"It is merely a rendezvous of pickpockets and thieves, accessible only to a chosen few. I feel sure you will enjoy yourselves there, for the bartender has the secret of a remarkable gin fizz, sweeter than a maiden's smile, more intoxicating than a kiss."

"Piffle!"

"It is a place where the student of sociology can obtain a world of valuable information."

"How do we get in?"

"Leave that to old Doctor Higgins," Anthony laughed. "To get out is the difficulty."

"Oh, I guess we'll get out," said the bulky Ringold.

"After we have concluded our investigations at the House of Seven Turnings," continued the ceremonious Higgins, "we will go to the Palace of Ebony, where a full negro orchestra—"

"The police closed that a week ago."

"But it has reopened on a scale larger and grander than ever."

"Let's take in the Austrian Village," offered Ringold.

"Patiently! Patiently, Behemoth! We'll take 'em all in. However, I wish to request one favor. If by any chance I should become embroiled with a minion of the law, please, oh please, let me finish him."

"Remember the last time," cautioned Anthony. "You've never come home a winner."

"Enough! Away with painful memories! All in favor—"

"AYE!" yelled the diners, whereupon a stampede ensued that caused the waiters in the main dining−room below to cease piling chairs upon the tables and hastily weight their napkins with salt− cellars.

But the crowd was not combative. They poured out upon the street in the best possible humor, and even at the House of Seven Turnings, as Higgins had dubbed the "hide−away" on Thirty−second Street, they made no disturbance. On the contrary, it was altogether too quiet for most of them, and they soon sought another scene. But there were deserters en route to the Palace of Ebony, and when in turn the joys of a full negro orchestra had palled and a course was set for the Austrian Village, the number of investigators had dwindled to a choice half−dozen.

These, however, were kindred spirits, veterans of many a midnight escapade, composing a flying squadron of exactly the right proportions for the utmost efficiency and mobility combined.

The hour was now past a respectable bedtime and the Tenderloin had awakened. The roar of commerce had dwindled away, and the comparative silence was broken only by the clang of an infrequent trolley. The streets were empty of vehicles, except for a few cabs that followed the little group persistently. As yet there was no need of them. The crowd was made up, for the most part, of healthy, full−blooded boys, fresh from weeks of training, strong of body, and with stomachs like galvanized iron. They showed scant evidence of intoxication. As for the weakest member of the party, it had long been known that one drink made Higgins drunk, and all further libations merely served to maintain him in status quo. Exhaustive experiments had proved that he was able to retain consciousness and the power of locomotion until the first streak of dawn appeared, after which he usually became a burden. For the present he was amply able to take care of himself, and now, although his speech was slightly thick, his demeanor was as didactic and severe as ever, and, save for the vagrant workings of his mind, he might have passed for a curate. As a whole, the crowd was in fine fettle.

The Austrian Village is a saloon, dance−hall, and all−night restaurant, flourishing brazenly within a stone's throw of Broadway, and it is counted one of the sights of the city. Upon entering, one may pass through a saloon where white−aproned waiters load trays and wrangle over checks, then into a ball−room filled with the flotsam and jetsam of midnight Manhattan. Above and around this room runs a white−and−gold balcony partitioned into boxes; beneath it are many tables separated from the waxed floor by a railing. Inside the enclosure men in

street−clothes and smartly gowned girls with enormous hats revolve nightly to the strains of an orchestra which nearly succeeds in drowning their voices. From the tables come laughter and snatches of song; waiters dash hither and yon. It is all very animated and gay on the surface, and none but the closely observant would note the weariness beneath the women's smiles, the laughter notes that occasionally jar, or perceive that the tailored gowns are imitations, the ermines mainly rabbit−skins.

But the eyes of youth are not analytical, and seen through a rosy haze the sight was inspiriting. The college men selected a table, and, shouldering the occupants aside without ceremony, seated themselves and pounded for a waiter.

Padden, the proprietor, came toward them, and, after greeting Anthony and Higgins by a shake of his left hand, ducked his round gray head in acknowledgment of an introduction to the others.

"Excuse my right," said he, displaying a swollen hand criss− crossed with surgeon's plaster. "A fellow got noisy last night."

"D'jou hit him?" queried Higgins, gazing with interest at the proprietor's knuckles.

"Yes. I swung for his jaw and went high. Teeth—" Mr. Padden said, vaguely. He turned a shrewd eye upon Anthony. "I heard about the game to−day. That was all right."

Kirk grinned boyishly. "I didn't have much to do with it; these are the fellows."

"Don't believe him," interrupted Ringold.

'Sure! he's too modest," Higgins chimed in. "Fine fellow an' all that, understand, but he's got two faults—he's modest and he's lazy. He's caused a lot of uneasiness to his father and me. Father's a fine man, too." He nodded his long, narrow head solemnly.

"We know who did the trick for us," added Anderson, the straw− haired half−back.

"Glad you dropped in," Mr. Padden assured them. "Anything you boys want and can't get, let me know."

When he had gone Higgins averred: "There's a fine man—peaceful, refined—got a lovely character, too. Let's be gentlemen while we're in his place."

Ringold rose. "I'm going to dance, fellows," he announced, and his companions followed him, with the exception of the cadaverous Higgins, who maintained that dancing was a pastime for the frivolous and weak.

When they returned to their table they found a stranger was seated with him, who rose as Higgins made him known.

"Boys, meet my old friend, Mr. Jefferson Locke, of St. Louis. He's all right."

The college men treated this new recruit with a hilarious cordiality, to which he responded with the air of one quite accustomed to such reunions.

"I was at the game this afternoon," he explained, when the greetings were over, "and recognized you chaps when you came in. I'm a football fan myself."

"You look as if you might have played," said Anthony, sizing up the broad frame of the Missourian with the critical eye of a coach.

"Yes. I used to play."

"Where?"

Mr. Locke avoided answer by calling loudly for a waiter, but when the orders had been taken Kirk repeated:

"Where did you play, Mr. Locke?"

"Left tackle."

"What university?"

"Oh one of the Southern colleges. It was a freshwater school—you wouldn't know the name." He changed the subject quickly by adding:

"I just got into town this morning and I'm sailing to−morrow. I couldn't catch a boat to−day, so I'm having a little blow−out on my own account. When I recognized you all, I just butted in. New York is a lonesome place for a stranger. Hope you don't mind my joining you."

"Not at all!" he was assured.

When he came to pay the waiter he displayed a roll of yellow− backed bills that caused Anthony to caution him:

"If I were you I'd put that in my shoe. I know this place."

Locke only laughed. "There's more where this came from. However, that's one reason I'd like to stick around

with you fellows. I have an idea I've been followed, and I don't care to be tapped on the head. If you will let me trail along I'll foot the bills. That's a fair proposition."

"It certainly sounds engaging," cried Higgins, joyously. "The sight of that money awakens a feeling of loyalty in our breasts. I speak for all when I say we will guard you like a lily as long as your money lasts, Mr. Locke."

"As long as we last," Ringold amended.

"It's a bargain," Locke agreed. "Hereafter I foot the bills. You're my guests for the evening, understand. If you'll agree to keep me company until my ship sails I'll do the entertaining."

"Oh, come now," Anthony struck in. "The fellows are just fooling. You're more than welcome to stay with us if you like, but we can't let you put up for it."

"Why not? We'll make a night of it. I'll show you how we spend money in St. Louis. I'm too nervous to go to bed."

Anthony protested, insisting that the other should regard himself as the guest of the crowd; but as Locke proved obdurate the question was allowed to drop until later, when Kirk found himself promoted by tacit consent to the position of host for the whole company. This was a little more than he had bargained for, but the sense of having triumphed in a contest of good−fellowship consoled him. Meanwhile, the stranger, despite his avowedly festive spirit, showed a certain reserve.

When the music again struck up he declined to dance, preferring to remain with Higgins in their inconspicuous corner.

"There's a fine fellow," the latter remarked, following his best friend's figure with his eyes, when he and Locke were once more alone. "Sweet nature."

"Anthony? Yes, he looks it."

"He's got just two faults, I always say: he's too modest by far and he's lazy—won't work."

"He doesn't have to work. His old man has plenty of coin, hasn't he?"

"Yes, and he'll keep it, too. Heartless old wretch. Mr.—What's your name, again?"

"Locke."

"Mr. Locke." The speaker stared mournfully at his companion. "D'you know what that unnatural parent did?"

"No."

"He let his only son and heir go to jail."

Mr. Jefferson Locke, of St. Louis, started; his wandering, watchful eyes flew back to the speaker.

"What! Jail?"

"That's what I remarked. He allowed his own flesh and blood to languish in a loathsome cell."

"What for? What did they get him for?" queried the other, quickly.

"Speeding."

"Oh!" Locke let himself back in his chair.

"Yes sir, he's a branded felon."

"Nonsense. That's nothing."

"But we love him just the same, criminal though he is" said Higgins, showing a disposition to weep. "If he were not such a strong, patient soul it might have ruined his whole life."

Mr. Locke grunted.

"S'true! You've no idea the disgrace it is to go to jail."

The Missourian stirred uneasily. "Say, it gets on my nerves to sit still," said he. "Let's move around."

"Patiently! Patiently! Somebody's sure to start something before long."

"Well, I don't care to get mixed up in a row."

Higgins laid a long, white hand upon the speaker's arm. "Then stay with us, Mr.—Locke. If you incline to peace, be one of us. We're a flock of sucking doves."

The dancers came crowding up to the table at the moment, and Ringold suggested loudly: "I'm hungry; let's eat again."

His proposal met with eager response.

"Where shall we go?" asked Anderson.

"I just fixed it with Padden for a private room upstairs," Anthony said. "All the cafes are closed now, and this is the best place in town for chicken creole, anyhow."

Accordingly he led the way, and the rest filed out after him; but as they left the ball−room a medium−sized man who had recently entered from the street caught a glimpse of them, craned his neck for a better view, then idled along behind.

II. THE TRAIL DIVIDES

Inspired by his recent rivalry with Mr. Jefferson Locke, Anthony played the part of host more lavishly than even the present occasion required. He ordered elaborately, and it was not long before corks were popping and dishes rattling quite as if the young men were really hungry. Mr. Locke, however, insisted that his friends should partake of a kind of drink previously unheard of, and with this in view had a confidential chat with the waiter, to whom he unostentatiously handed a five−dollar retainer. No one witnessed this unusual generosity except Higgins, who commended it fondly; but his remarks went unheeded in the general clamor.

The meal was at its noisiest when the man whom Locke had so generously tipped spoke to him quietly. Whatever his words, they affected the listener strongly. Locke's face whitened, then grew muddy and yellow, his hands trembled, his lips went dry. He half arose from his chair, then cast a swift look about the room. His companions were too well occupied, however, to notice this by−play even when the waiter continued, in a low tone:

"He slipped me a ten−spot, so I thought it must be something worth while."

"He—he's alone, you say?"

"Seems to be. What shall I do, sir?"

Locke took something from his pocket and thrust it into the fellow's hand, while the look in his eyes changed to one of desperation.

"Step outside and wait. Don't let him come up. I'll call you in a minute."

Ringold was recounting his version of the first touchdown—how he had been forced inch by inch across the goal line to the tune of thirty thousand yelling throats and his companions were hanging upon his words, when their new friend interrupted in such a tone that Anthony inquired in surprise:

"What's wrong, old man? Are you sick?"

Locke shook his head. "I told you fellows I'd been followed this evening. Remember? Well, there's a man down−stairs who has given the waiter ten dollars to let him have his coat and apron so he can come in here."

"What for?"

"Who is he?"

The men stared at the speaker with a sudden new interest.

"I'm not sure. I—think it's part of a plan to rob me." He let his gaze roam from one face to another. "You see—I just came into a big piece of coin, and I've got it with me. I'm—I'm alone in New York, understand? They've followed me from St. Louis. Now, I want you boys to help me dodge this—"

Kirk Anthony rose suddenly, moving as lightly upon his feet as a dancer.

"You say he's below?"

Locke nodded. It was plain that he was quite unnerved.

Ringold rose in turn and lurched ponderously toward the door, but Kirk stepped in front of him with a sharp word:

"Wait! I'll manage this."

"Lemme go," expostulated the centre−rush. "Locke's a good fellow and this man wants to trim him."

"No, no! Sit down!" Ringold obeyed. "If he wants to join us, we'll have him come up."

"What?" cried Locke, leaping nervously from his chair. "Don't do that. I want to get out of here."

"Not a bit like it." Kirk's eyes were sparkling. "We'll give this fellow the third degree and find out who his pals are."

"Grand idea!" Higgins seconded with enthusiasm. "Grand!"

"Hold on! I can't do that. I've got to sail at ten o'clock. I don't dare get into trouble, don't you understand? It's important." Locke seemed in an extraordinary panic.

"Oh, we'll see that you catch your boat all right," Kirk assured him; and then before the other could interfere he rang for the waiter.

"Give that chap your coat and apron," he ordered, when the attendant answered, "and when I ring next send him up. Pass the word to Padden and the others not to notice any little disturbance. I'll answer for results."

"I'm going to get out," cried the man from St. Louis. "He mustn't see me."

"He'll see you sure if you leave now. You'll have to pass him. Stick here. We'll have some fun."

The white−faced man sank back into his chair, while Anthony directed sharply:

"Now, gentlemen, be seated. Here, Locke, your back to the door— your face looks like a chalk−mine. There! Now don't be so nervous— we'll cure this fellow's ambition as a gin−slinger. I'll change names with you for a minute. Now, Ringold, go ahead with your story." Then, as the giant took up his tale again: "Listen to him, fellows; look pleasant, please. Remember you're not sitting up with a corpse. A little more ginger, Ringie. Good!" He pushed the button twice, and a moment Later the door opened quietly to admit a medium−sized man in white coat and apron.

Had the young men been a little less exhilarated they might have suspected that Locke's story of having been dogged from St. Louis was a trifle exaggerated; for, instead of singling him out at first glance, the new−comer paused at a respectful distance inside the door and allowed his eyes to shift uncertainly from one to another as if in doubt as to which was his quarry. Anthony did not dream that it was his own resemblance to the Missourian that led to this confusion, but in fact, while he and Locke were totally unlike when closely compared, they were of a similar size and coloring, and the same general description would have fitted both.

Having allowed the intruder a moment in which to take in the room, Kirk leaned back in his chair and nodded for him to approach.

"Cigars!" he ordered. "Bring a box of Carolinas."

"Yes, sir. Are you Mr. Locke, sir?" inquired the new waiter.

"Yes," said Kirk.

"Telephone message for you, Mr. Locke," the waiter muttered.

"What's that?" Anthony queried, loud enough for the others to hear.

"Somebody calling you by 'phone. They're holding the wire outside. I'll show you the booth."

"Oh, will you?" Kirk Anthony's hands suddenly shot out and seized the masquerader by the throat. The man uttered a startled gasp, but simultaneously the iron grip of Marty Ringold fell upon his arms and doubled them behind him, while Kirk gibed:

"You'll get me outside and into a telephone booth, eh? My dear sir, that is old stuff."

The rest of the party were on their feet instantly, watching the struggle and crowding forward with angry exclamations. Ringold, with the man's two wrists locked securely in his own huge paw, was growling:

"Smooth way to do up a fellow, I call it."

"All the way from St. Louis for a telephone call, eh?" Anthony sank his thumbs into the stranger's throat, then, as the man's face grew black and his contortions diminished, added: "We're going to make a good waiter out of you."

Jefferson Locke broke in excitedly: "Choke him good! Choke him! That's right. Put him out for keeps. For God's sake, don't let him go!"

But it was not Kirk's idea to strangle his victim beyond a certain point. He relaxed his grip after a moment and, nodding to Ringold to do likewise, took the fellow's wrists himself, then swung him about until he faced the others. The man's lungs filled with fresh air, he began to struggle once more, and when his voice had returned he gasped:

"I'll get you for this. You'll do a trick—" He mumbled a name that did not sound at all like Jefferson Locke, whereupon the Missourian made a rush at him that required the full strength of Anthony's free hand to thwart.

"Here, stand back! I've got him!"

"I'll kill him!" chattered the other.

"Let me go," the stranger gasped. "I'll take you all in. I'm an officer."

"It's a lie!" shouted Locke. "He's a thief."

"I tell you I'm—an officer; I arrest this—"

The words were cut off abruptly by a loud exclamation from Higgins and a crash of glass. Kirk Anthony's face was drenched, his eyes were filled with a stinging liquid; he felt his prisoner sink limply back into his arms and beheld Higgins struggling in the grasp of big Marty Ringold, the foil−covered neck of a wine bottle in his fingers.

The foolish fellow had been hovering uncertainly round the edges of the crowd, longing to help his friends and crazily anxious to win glory by some deed of valor. At the first opening he had darted wildly into the fray, not

realizing that the enemy was already helpless in the hands of his captors.

"I've got him!" he cried, joyously. "He's out!'

"Higgins!" Anthony exclaimed, sharply. "What the devil—" Then the dead weight in his arms, the lolling head and sagging jaw of the stranger, sobered him like a deluge of ice−water.

"You've done it this time," he muttered.

"Good God!" Locke cried. "Let's get away! He's hurt!"

"Here, you!" Anthony shot a command at the speaker that checked him half−way across the room. "Ringold, take the door and don't let anybody in or out." To Higgins he exclaimed, "You idiot, didn't you see I had his hands?"

"No. Had to get him," returned Higgins, with vinous dignity. "Wanted to rob my old friend, Mr.—What's his name?"

"We've got to leave quick before we get in bad," Locke reiterated, nervously, but Anthony retorted:

"We're in bad now. I want Padden." He stepped to the door and signaled a passing waiter. A moment later the proprietor knocked, and Ringold admitted him.

"What's the—" Padden started at sight of the motionless figure on the floor, and, kneeling beside it, made a quick examination, while Anthony explained the circumstances leading up to the assault.

"Thief, eh? I see."

"Is he badly hurt?" queried Locke, bending a pale face upon them.

"Huh! I guess he's due for the hospital," the owner of the Austrian Village announced. "He had his nerve, trying to turn a trick in my place. I thought I knew all the dips, but he's a stranger." With nimble fingers he ran through the fellow's pockets, then continued:

"I'm glad you got him, but you'd better get together and rehearse before the police—" He stopped abruptly once more, then looked up curiously.

"What is it?" questioned the man from Missouri.

Padden pointed silently to the lapel of the fellow's vest, which he had turned back. A nickeled badge was pinned upon it. "He's no thief; he's a detective—a plain−clothes man!"

"Wha'd I tell you!" Higgins exulted. "I can smell 'em!"

The crowd looked nonplussed, with the exception of Jefferson Locke, who became calmer than at any time since the waiter had first whispered into his ear.

"We didn't know who he was," he began, hurriedly, "You must square it for us, Padden. I don't care what it costs." He extended a bulky roll of bank−notes toward the gray−haired man. "These boys can't stand this sort of thing, and neither can I. I've got to sail at ten o'clock this morning."

"Looks to me like you've croaked him," said the proprietor, ignoring the proffered money.

"It's worth a thousand dollars to me not to miss my boat."

"Wait a minute." Padden emptied the unconscious man's pockets, among other things of some telegrams and a legally folded paper. The latter he opened and scanned swiftly, then turned his little eyes upon Locke without a word, whereupon that gentleman, with equal silence, took from his inside pocket a wallet, and selected a bill, the denomination of which he displayed to the; proprietor before folding it inside the bundle he held.

"Here! It may cost you something."

Padden nodded and accepted the money, saying:

"Oh, I guess I can fix it. I know the right doctor." He regained his feet, then warned the onlookers: "But you'll have to keep your traps closed, understand?"

"Will he die?" asked Ringold, fearfully, his back still against the door.

"Not a chance. But if he does he'll never know who hit him. You see, we picked him up in the alley and brought him in." Padden winked meaningly. "It happens right along in this part of town. Do you get me? I'll keep these." He indicated the badge and papers in his hand. "Now go out as if nothing had come off. Drop in again the next time you're in town. I'll take care of the supper checks."

As the partly sobered visitors struggled into their overcoats Padden drew Locke aside, and, nodding toward Higgins, who was still talkative, said:

"If you want to catch that ten o'clock boat you'd better stick close to your friend; I know him."

"Thanks!" Locke glanced at the prostrate figure, then inquired in a low tone: "On the level, will he make it?"

"Hard to tell. Just the same, if I was you I'd change my sailing— he might come to."

"You chaps have done me a big favor to−night," said Locke, a little later, when he and his companions were safely out of the Austrian Village, "and I won't forget it, either. Now let's finish the evening the way we began it."

Anderson, Rankin, and Burroughs, to conceal their nervousness, pleaded bodily fatigue, while Anthony also declared that he had enjoyed himself sufficiently for one night and intended to go home and to bed. "That episode rather got on my nerves," he acknowledged.

"Mine, too," assented Locke. "That's why you mustn't leave me. I just won't let you. Remember, you agreed to see me off."

"'S'right, fellows," Higgins joined in. "We agreed to put him aboard and we must do it. Don't break up the party, Kirk."

"I don't want to go home," Ringold muttered.

"It's a breach of hospitality to go home," Higgins insisted. "Besides, after my bloody 'ncounter with that limb of the law I need a stimulant. You must look after me."

"I shall tuck you in your little bed," Kirk told him. But Higgins would hear to nothing of the sort, protesting that he was in honor bound to conduct his old friend Locke to the steamer, and Anthony feared that without his protection some harm might befall his irresponsible and impulsive companion. Candor requires it to be said that he did hesitate, arguing long with the limp−legged Higgins; but Locke was insistent, the others grew impatient of the delay, and in the end he allowed himself to be persuaded.

It is often through just such sudden, inconsequent decisions, influenced perhaps by the merest trifles, that a man's life is made great or small; just such narrow forkings of the trail may divert him into strange adventurings, or into worlds undreamed of. Kirk Anthony, twenty−six years old, with a heritage at hand, and with an average capacity for good or evil, chose the turning that led him swiftly from the world he knew into an alien land.

Numbed as they were by the excesses of the evening, it did not take the young men long to lose all clear and vivid remembrance of this recent experience; for the time had come when Nature was offering her last resistance, and their brains were badly awhirl. Of all the four, Jefferson Locke was the only one who retained his wits to the fullest—a circumstance that would have proved him the owner of a remarkably steady head had it not been for the fact that he had cunningly substituted water for gin each time it came his turn to drink. It was a commentary upon the state of his companions that they did not notice the limpid clearness of his beverage.

Dawn found them in an East Side basement drinking−place frequented by the lowest classes. Ringold was slumbering peacefully, half overflowing the wet surface of a table; Anthony had discovered musical talent in the bartender and was seated at a battered piano, laboriously experimenting with the accompaniment to an Irish ballad; Higgins and Locke were talking earnestly. It was the slackest, blackest hour in an all−night dive; the nocturnal habitues had slunk away, and the day's trade had not yet begun. Higgins, drawn and haggard beneath his drunken flush, was babbling incessantly; Locke, as usual, sat facing the entrance, his eyes watchful, his countenance alert. In spite of the fact that he had constantly plied his companion with liquor in the hope of stilling his tongue, Higgins seemed incapable of silence, and kept breaking forth into loud, garbled recitals of the scene at Padden's, which caused the Missourian to shiver with apprehension. To a sober eye it would have been patent that Locke was laboring under some strong excitement; for every door that opened caused him to start, every stranger that entered made him quake. He consulted his watch repeatedly, he flushed and paled and fidgeted, then lost himself in frowning meditation.

"Grandes' fellow I ever met," Higgins was saying for the hundredth time. "Got two faults, tha's all; he's modesht an' he's lazy—he won't work."

"Anthony?"

"Yes."

Locke stirred himself, and, leaning forward, said: "You and he are good friends, eh?"

"Best ever."

"Would you like to play a joke on him?"

"Joke? Can't be done. He's wises' guy ever. I've tried it an' always get the wors' of it. Yes, sir, he's wise guy. Jus' got two faults: he won't work an'—"

"Look here! Why don't you make him work?"

"Huh?" Higgins turned a pair of bleared, unfocusable eyes upon the speaker.

"Why don't somebody make him work?"

The lean−faced youth laughed moistly.

"Tha's good joke."

"I mean it."

"Got too much money. 'S old man puts up reg'lar."

"Listen! It's a shame for a fine fellow like him to go to the dogs." Higgins nodded heavily in agreement. "Why don't you send him away where he'll have to rustle? That's the joke I meant."

"Huh?" Again the listener's mind failed to follow, and Locke repeated his words, concluding: "It would make a new man of him."

"Oh, he wouldn't work. Too lazy."

"He'd have to if he were broke."

"But he AIN'T broke. Didn't I tell you 's old man puts up reg'lar? Fine man, too, Misser Anthony; owns railroads."

"I'll tell you how we can work it. I've got a ticket for Central America in my pocket. The boat sails at ten. Let's send him down there."

"Wha' for?"

Locke kept his temper with an effort. "To make a man of him. We'll go through his clothes and when he lands he'll be broke. He'll HAVE to work. Don't you see?"

"No." Anthony's friend did not see. "He don't want to go to Central America," he argued; "he's got a new autom'bile."

"But suppose we got him soused, went through his pockets, and then put him aboard the boat. He'd be at sea by the time he woke up; he couldn't get back; he'd have to work; don't you see? He'd be broke when he landed and have to rustle money to get back with. I think it's an awful funny idea."

The undeniable humor of such a situation finally dawned upon Higgins's mind, and he burst into a loud guffaw.

"Hey there! Shut up!" Anthony called from the piano. "Listen here! I've found the lost chord." He bore down with his huge hands upon the yellow keyboard, bringing forth a metallic crash that blended fearfully with the bartender's voice. "It's a great discovery."

"I'll get him full if you'll help manage him," Locke went on. "And here's the ticket." He tapped his pocket.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Bought it yesterday. It's first class and better, and he'll fit my description. We're about the same size."

"Ain't you goin'?"

"No. I've changed my mind. I may jump over to Paris. Come, are you on?"

Higgins giggled. "Darn' funny idea, if you can get him full."

"Wait." Locke rose and went to the bar, where he called loudly for the singer; then, when the bartender had deserted the piano, he spoke to Anthony: "Keep it up, old man, you're doing fine."

For some moments he talked earnestly to the man behind the bar; but his back was to Higgins, Anthony was occupied, and Ringold still slumbered; hence no one observed the transfer of another of those yellow bills of which he seemed to have an unlimited store.

Strangely enough, Mr. Jefferson Locke's plan worked without a hitch. Within ten minutes after Kirk Anthony had taken the drink handed him he declared himself sleepy, and rose from the piano, only to seek a chair, into which he flung himself heavily.

"It's all right," Locke told his drunken companion. "I've got a taxi waiting. We'll leave Ringold where he is."

Twenty−four hours later Adelbert Higgins undertook to recall what had happened to him after he left Muller's place on East Fourteenth Street, but his memory was tricky. He recollected a vaguely humorous discussion of some sort with a stranger, the details of which were almost entirely missing. He remembered that dawn had broken when he came out of the saloon, but beyond that he could not go with any degree of certainty. There was a hazy memory of an interminable ride in a closed vehicle of some sort, a dizzy panorama of moving buildings, bleak, wind−swept trees, frosty meadows, and land−locked lakes backed by what were either distant mountain ranges or apartment houses. This last, however, was all very blurred and indistinct.

As to who was with him on the ride, or what took place thereafter, he had no memory and no opportunity of

learning, owing to certain unexpected and alarming occurrences which made it imperative for him to terminate his connection with his college, as big Marty Ringold had done earlier in the day, and begin to pack his belongings. Partly out of deference to the frantic appeals of his widowed mother, partly owing to the telephoned advice of Mr. Michael Padden, of Sixth Avenue, who said the injured man had recognized one of his assailants, he booked passage to Japan by the next steamer out of Vancouver. He left New York that afternoon by the Twentieth Century Limited, taking with him only one suit− case and a determination to see the world.

III. A GAP

Strictly speaking, Kirk Anthony did not awake to a realization of his surroundings, but became conscious of them through a long process of dull, dreamy speculation. He never knew the precise moment when his eyes opened and sleep left him, but at cost of considerable mental effort he finally brought himself to the conviction that hours had passed and another day had arrived. More than once after long, white nights in New York City, he had awakened amid strange surroundings and had been forced to wait upon his lagging memory; but this time his mind refused to work, even after he knew himself to be fully roused. So he closed his eyes with the admonition:

"Now, begin all over again, Kirk. When you left Padden's place you went to Maxim's and listened to the fat quartette, then to the place where the waiter held out a dollar. After the trouble at that point, you tried to get into Tony's rathskeller and couldn't, so you started for the East Side. Ringold was very drunk. Good! Everything is clear so far. Next you were playing a piano with yellow teeth while somebody sang something about a 'Little Brown Cot.' After that—Lord, you must have been drinking! Well, let's run through it again."

But his efforts were vain; he could recall nothing beyond the piano, so fell to wondering what hotel this could be.

"Some East Side joint," he decided, "and a cheap one too, from the size of this stall." He noted another brass bed close at hand and reasoned that Ringold or Higgins must have risen early, leaving him to finish his sleep. That was considerate, of course, but— Good heavens, it must be late! And he was due to motor to New Haven at noon! He raised himself suddenly, and was half out of bed when he fell back, with a cry, as if an unseen hand had smitten him. He clapped both palms to his head, realizing that he was very sick indeed. The sensation was unlike anything he had ever felt before. His head was splitting, he felt a frightful nausea, the whole room was rocking and reeling as if to pitch him out of bed. It was terrible; so he arose blindly and felt his way toward the telephone. Failing to find it, he pushed a button instead, then tumbled back to bed, reviling the luck that had brought him to such a miserable place. He closed his eyes tightly and calmed his stomach by an effort of will. At last he heard the door open and a voice inquire:

"Did you ring, sir?"

"An hour ago. Haven't you more than one bell−hop in this place?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"And I'm sick, mighty sick. I'm going to die."

"I think not, sir; the others are sick, too."

"That's good! I was afraid they'd dressed and gone." It was some consolation to know that Ringold and Higgins had not escaped their share of suffering. "How is Hig—the bony fellow?"

"Do you mean the gentleman in thirty−two?"

"How should I know his number? That's not Hig's description, however—even you could tell that he is no gentle—Oh, Lord!"

"Can I get you something, sir—a little champagne, perhaps, to settle your stomach?"

"NO, NO! Get me a taxicab. I want to go up−town."

"Rather a long drive, isn't it?" snickered the bell−boy.

"Never mind the comedy." Anthony opened his eyes. "Hello! Are you the clerk?" Instead of the bell−hop he had expected he beheld a man in white jacket and black trousers.

"No, sir, I'm the steward."

The invalid shook his head faintly. "Funny place I've got into. What's the name of it?"

"This? Oh! The SANTA CRUZ."

"Never heard of it. Why didn't they give me a good room? This is fierce."

"Suite A is considered very good, sir. It is one of the best on the line."

"Line?" Kirk grunted. "So this is some dead−line dump. Well, I'm going to get out—understand? Hand me my trousers and I'll slip you a quarter."

The steward did as desired, but a blind search showed the pockets to be empty.

"Give me the coat and vest." But here again Kirk found nothing, and was forced to apologize. "Sorry, old

man, but I must have left it at the office. Now be a good fellow and hustle up that taxi. I'm getting sicker every minute."

"Perhaps you had better have the doctor?"

"Is there a good one handy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Here in the hotel?"

The steward seemed undecided whether to treat the occupant of Suite A as a humorist or a lunatic, but finally he observed, "This isn't a hotel, sir."

"That's what I though−t−more like a roadhouse," "This is a ship."

"A—WHAT?" Anthony raised himself and stared at the white−clad figure over the foot of his little brass bed.

"This is a ship, sir."

"You get out of here!" yelled the infuriated young man. He cast his eyes about for some missile to hurl at this insolent menial, and, spying a heavy glass pitcher upon a stand beside him, reached for it, whereat the steward retreated hastily to the door.

"I beg pardon, sir. I will send the doctor at once."

"Must think I'm still drunk," mumbled Anthony, dazedly, as he once more laid his head upon his pillow with a groan.

When his dizziness had diminished sufficiently to permit him to open his eyes he scanned his surroundings more carefully; but his vision was unreliable. His head, too, continued to feel as if his skull were being forcibly spread apart by some fiendish instrument concealed within it. His mouth was parched, his stomach violently rebellious. In spite of these distractions he began to note certain unfamiliar features about this place. The wall−paper, for instance, which at first glance he had taken for the work of some cheap decorator, turned out to be tapestry, as he proved by extending a shaky hand. The low ceiling, the little windows with wooden blinds, the furniture itself, were all out of keeping with hotel usages. He discovered by rolling his head that there was a mahogany dresser over by the door and a padded couch covered with chintz. There were folding brass clothes−hooks on the wall, moreover, and an electric fan, while a narrow door gave him a glimpse of a tiny, white−enamelled bath−room.

He took in these details laboriously, deciding finally that he was too intoxicated to see aright, for, while the place was quite unlike an ordinary hotel room, neither did it resemble any steamship stateroom he had ever seen; it was more like a lady's boudoir. To be sure, he felt a sickening surge and roll now and then, but at other times the whole room made a complete revolution, which was manifestly contrary to the law of gravitation and therefore not to be trusted as evidence. There were plenty of reasons, moreover, why this could not be a ship. The mere supposition was absurd. No, this must be a room in some up−town club, or perhaps a bachelor hotel. Kirk had many friends with quarters decorated to suit their own peculiar fancies, and he decided that in all probability one of these had met him on the street and taken him home for safe−keeping. He had barely settled this in his mind when the door opened for a second time and a man in uniform entered.

"The steward said you wanted me," he began.

"No; I want a doctor."

"I am the doctor."

"I thought you were the elevator man. I'm sick—awful sick—"

"Can you vomit?"

"Certainly! Anybody can do that."

The stranger pulled up a stool, seated himself beside the bed, then felt of Anthony's cheek.

"You have a fever."

"That explains everything." Kirk sighed thankfully and closed his eyes once more, for the doctor had begun to revolve slowly, with the bed as an axis. "How are the other boys coming on?"

"Everybody is laid out. It's a bad night."

"Night? It must be nearly daylight by this time."

"Oh no! It is not midnight yet."

"Not midnight? Why, I didn't turn in until—" Anthony raised himself suddenly. "Good Lord! have I slept all day?"

"You certainly have."

"Whose room is this?"

"Your room, of course. Here, take one of these capsules; it will settle your stomach."

"Better give me something to settle my bill if I've been here that long. I'm broke again."

"You're not fully awake yet," said the doctor. "People have funny ideas when they're sick."

"Well, I know I'm broke, anyhow! That's no idea; it's a condition. I went through my clothes just now and I'm all in. I must get back to the Astor, too, for I had arranged to motor up to New Haven at noon."

"Let me feel your pulse," said the doctor, quietly.

"The boys will think I'm lost. I never did such a thing before."

"Where do you think you are?" inquired the physician.

"I don't know. It's a nice little hotel, but—"

"This isn't a hotel. This is a ship."

Anthony was silent for a moment. Then he sighed feebly and said:

"Doctor, you shouldn't make fun of a man at the point of death. It isn't professional."

"Fact," said the doctor, abstractedly gazing at his watch, while he held Anthony's wrist between his fingers. "We are one hundred and fifty miles out of New York. The first officer told me you were considerably intoxicated when you came aboard, but," he continued brusquely, rising and closing his watch with a snap, "you will remember it all in a little while, Mr. Locke."

"What did you call me?"

"Locke. You haven't forgotten your name, too?"

"Wait!"

Again Anthony pressed his throbbing temples with both hot hands and strove to collect his whirling wits. At last he began to speak, measuring his words with care.

"Now, I KNOW you are wrong, Doctor, and I'll tell you why. You see, my name isn't Locke; it's Anthony. Locke went away on a ship, but *I* stayed in New York; understand? Well, he's the fellow you're talking to and I'm asleep somewhere down around the Bowery. I'm not here at all. *I* didn't want to go anywhere on a ship; I couldn't go; I didn't have the price. That supper was a hundred and seventy."

"Nevertheless, this is a ship," the physician patiently explained, "and you're on it and I'm talking to you. What is more, you have not exchanged identities with your friend Anthony, for your ticket reads 'Jefferson Locke.' You'll be all right if you will just go to sleep and give that capsule a chance to operate."

"Ask Higgins or Ringold who I am."

"There's no one aboard by either of those names."

"Say!" Anthony raised himself excitedly on one arm, but was forced to lie down again without delay. "If this is a ship, I must have come aboard. How did I do it? When? Where?"

"You came on with two men, or rather between two men, about eight− thirty this morning. They put you in here, gave your ticket to the purser, and went ashore. The slim fellow was crying, and one of the deck−hands had to help him down the gangway."

"That was Higgins all right. Now, Doctor, granting, just for the sake of argument, that this is a ship and that I am Jefferson Locke, when is your next stop?"

"One week."

"What?" Kirk's eyes opened wide with horror. "I can't stay here a week."

"You will have to."

"But I tell you I CAN'T, I just can't. I bought a new car the other day and it's standing in front of the New York Theatre. Yes, and I have two rooms and a bath at the Astor, at fifteen dollars a day."

The physician smiled heartlessly. "You must have been drinking pretty heavily, but I guess you will remember everything by−and− by."

"I can't understand it," groaned the bewildered invalid. "What ship is this—if it is really a ship?"

"The SANTA CRUZ. Belongs to the United Fruit Company. This is one of the bridal suites; it is 11:30 P.M., November 21st. We are bound for Colon."

"Where is that?"

"Panama."

"Panama is in Central America or Mexico or somewhere, isn't it?"

"It is. Now, do you remember anything more?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, then, go to sleep. You'll be all right in the morning, Mr. Locke."

"Anthony."

"Very well, Mr. Anthony, if you prefer. Is there anything more you would like to ask me?"

"No."

"Of course, there may have been some mistake," the medical man observed, doubtfully, as he opened the door. "Maybe you intended to take some other ship?"

"No mistake at all," the sick man assured him. "I'm beginning to remember now. You see, I lost my hat and decided I'd run down to Panama and get another. Good−night."

"Good−night. That capsule will make you sleep."

When the officer had gone Kirk mumbled to himself: "If it turns out that I AM in New York, after all, when I wake up I'll lick that doctor." Then he turned over and fell asleep.

But morning showed him the truth of the doctor's information. He awoke early and, although his head still behaved queerly and he had moments of nausea, he dressed himself and went on deck. The shock he had received on the evening before was as nothing to what he felt now upon stepping out into the light of day. In spite of his growing conviction, he had cherished a lingering hope that it was all a dream, and the feeling did not entirely vanish until he had really seen for himself. Then his dismay was overwhelming.

A broad deck, still wet from its morning scrubbing and lined with steamer chairs, lay in front of him. A limitless, oily sea stretched out before his bewildered eyes; he touched the rail with his hands to verify his vision. The strangeness of it was uncanny. He felt as if he were walking in his sleep. He realized that a great fragment had suddenly dropped out of his life's pattern, and it was intensely disquieting to think of all it might have carried with it.

He began to pace the deck mechanically, falling in with the other early risers who were out for a breath of morning air, striving to adjust himself to this new state of affairs. But even though the solid reality of his surroundings soon brought him back more nearly to a normal state of mind, he felt an ever−present expectancy of some new shock, some new and abrupt transition that might yet bring him back to his starting−point. But this obsession gradually left him, as the brisk sea breeze brought him to a proper perspective and braced him to face the full consequences of his long, restless night's orgy.

No man is so systematic, none is so well ordered in his affairs, that he can cut out a slice of his life at a moment's notice without suffering many kinds of loss and inconvenience. Although Anthony was a youth of few responsibilities, he awoke suddenly to the fact that there were a thousand things that needed doing, a thousand people who needed to know his whereabouts, a thousand things that were bound to go wrong. For instance, there was his brand−new French car, standing with motor blanketed beside the Forty−fifth Street curb.

What had happened to it, and to the urchin he had left in charge of it? He owed a thousand dollars on its purchase, which he had promised to pay yesterday, Then, too, he had neglected his house account at the University Club, and it was long overdue. That remittance from his father had come just in the nick of time. Suddenly he recalled placing the check in his bill−case, and he searched himself diligently, but found nothing. That reminded him that he had won a bet or two on the football game and the money needed collecting. There was the shooting trip to Cape Cod as well. He was due there to−day for a week−end among the geese and brant. What would Benny Glover think when he failed to show up or even telegraph? Benny's sister was coming down from Boston with some friends and—oh, it was simply imperative that he get some word ashore.

He let his eyes rove over the ship in desperation, then a happy thought came to him.

"The wireless!" he said aloud. "Bonehead! Why didn't you think of that long ago?" A glance at the rigging showed him that the Santa Cruz was equipped with a plant, and a moment later he was hammering at the operator's door.

"I want to send a message right away!" he cried, excitedly; but the "wireless" shook his head with a smile.

"I'm sorry, but—"

"It's important; awfully important. I'll pay you anything!" Kirk rammed a hand mechanically into his empty pocket.

"We're installing a new system," said the operator. "The old apparatus wasn't satisfactory and it's being changed throughout."

"Then you−you can't send a message—possibly?"

"Nothing doing until the next trip."

Kirk strode forward and stared disconsolately down upon the freight deck in a vain endeavor to collect his thoughts. How in the devil had he managed to get into this mess? Could it be one of Higgins's senseless pranks, or was there something deeper, more sinister behind it? He recalled the incidents of that wild night and began to have a disquieting doubt. Did that chance meeting with the chap from St. Louis have anything to do with his presence here, or had he really decided in some foolish, drunken whim to take a trip to Central America? He hardly knew what to think or where to begin his reasoning. He recollected that Jefferson Locke had not impressed him very favorably at the start, and that his behavior upon the appearance of the plain−clothes man had not improved that first impression. It seemed certain that he must have had his hand in this affair, else how would Anthony now find himself in possession of his ticket? What had become of the rightful occupant of Suite A? What had become of Higgins's unfortunate victim with the cracked head? What did it all signify? Kirk sighed disconsolately and gave it up. In five days more he would learn the answer, anyhow, for there must be a cable from Panama to the States. Meanwhile, he supposed he must reconcile himself to his condition. But it was tough to have two weeks of valuable time snatched out of his eventful life. It was maddening.

IV. NEW ACQUAINTANCES

The sound of a bugle, which Kirk interpreted as an invitation to breakfast, reminded him that he was famished, and he lost no time in going below. Upon his appearance the steward made it plain to him in some subtle manner that the occupant of Suite A needed nothing beyond the mere possession of those magnificent quarters to insure the most considerate treatment. Kirk was placed at the captain's table, where his hunger was soon appeased, and his outlook grew more cheerful with the complete restoration of bodily comfort. Feeling somewhat less dissatisfied with his surroundings, he began to study the faces of his fellow−passengers.

"Getting your sea legs, Mr. Locke?" inquired the man at his right.

"My name is Anthony."

"I beg your pardon! The passenger list said—"

"That was a mistake."

"My name is Stein. May I ask where you are bound for?"

"I think the place is Panama."

"Going to work on the canal?"

"What canal? Oh, of course! Now I remember hearing something about a Panama Canal. Is that where it is?"

"That's the place," Stein replied, dryly.

"I'm not going to work. I don't work—don't know how."

"I see. Pleasure trip?"

"Purely a pleasure trip. I'm having a great time. By−the−way, this canal affair is something new, isn't it?"

"It was begun about thirty years ago." Mr. Stein regarded the speaker with puzzled inquiry, as if undecided in what spirit to take him.

"What's the idea? Why don't they finish it up?"

"I thought you were an American," returned the other, politely. "You have no accent."

"I am an American. I'm the fellow who was born in Albany, New York. If you look on the map you'll find the town has a little ring around it."

"And really don't you know anything about the Panama Canal?"

"Oh, I've heard it mentioned."

"Well, you won't hear anything else mentioned down here; it's the one and only subject of conversation. Nobody thinks or talks or dreams about anything except the canal. Everybody works on it or else works for somebody who does. For instance, that white−haired man at the other end of the table is Colonel Bland, one of the commissioners. The man over there with the black beard is one of the engineers at Gatun."

Stein, who seemed a gossipy person, ran on glibly for a time, pointing out the passengers of note and giving brief details about them. Suddenly he laid his hand on Anthony's arm, and said:

"See this fellow coming down the stairs?" Anthony beheld a slender, bald−headed man of youthful appearance. "That is Stephen Cortlandt. You've heard of the Cortlandts?"

"Sure! One of them pitched for the Cubs."

"I mean the Cortlandts of Washington. They're swell people, society folks and all that—" He broke off to bow effusively to the late comer, who seated himself opposite; then he introduced Kirk.

Mr. Cortlandt impressed Anthony as a cold−blooded, highly schooled person, absolutely devoid of sentiment, His face was stony, his eyes were cool, even his linen partook of his own unruffled calm. He seemed by no means effeminate, yet he was one of those immaculate beings upon whom one can scarcely imagine a speck of dust or a bead of perspiration. His hair—what was left of it—was parted to a nicety, his clothes were faultless, and he had an air of quiet assurance.

"By−the−way, we're getting up a pool on the ship's run," Stein told his new acquaintance. "Would you like to join?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm for anything in the line of chance."

"Very well. I'll see you in the smoking−room later. It will cost you only five dollars."

Kirk suddenly recalled his financial condition and hastened to say, a trifle lamely:

"Come to think about it, I believe I'll stay out. I never gamble." Chancing to glance up at the moment, he found Mr. Cortlandt's eyes fixed upon him with a peculiarly amused look, and a few minutes later he followed Mr. Stein to the deck above.

Once in his own stateroom, the young man began a thorough exploration, realizing more keenly than before that without baggage or money his plight might prove distressing. But, look as he would, he could find no trace of either, and an inadvertent glance in the mirror betrayed the further fact that his linen was long since past a presentable stage. Another despairing search showed that even his watch was gone and that his only asset, evidently overlooked by the hilarious Higgins and his co−partner in crime, was a modest three−stone finger ring. He was regarding this speculatively when the purser knocked, then entered at his call.

"I've just heard that there's a mistake about your ticket," the new−comer began. "It is made out to 'Mr. Jefferson Locke,' but the doctor says you insist your name is something else."

"That's right. My name is Anthony."

"Then how did I get this ticket?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Have you any baggage?"

"I don't know."

"What is your destination?"

"I don't know. You'll pardon my limited vocabulary?"

"Are you joking?"

"Do I look as if I were?"

"But I don't understand."

"Neither do I. But I must have some luggage—a fellow wouldn't make a trip like this without baggage, would he?"

"I should think not. I'll look it up for you if you wish. But about this ticket—"

"My dear man, don't bother me with that. I have worries enough as it is. What I want now is a clean shirt and collar."

"Yes, but this ticket says—"

"Please! Look at my linen. I'll create a scandal this way."

"Mr. Locke—"

"Anthony."

"Very well, Mr. Anthony. I must straighten out this ticket affair. Really, I must."

"All right, straighten away."

"If you are not Mr. Locke, it is no good."

"Hurrah! Put me off."

"You don't understand—the ticket is good, but—See here, there's something mighty strange about this. You say your name isn't Locke, you have no baggage, you even thought this ship was a hotel—"

"I did. It was a great disappointment. And now I want a shirt." Anthony began to laugh. "Funny, isn't it?"

"You will have to buy another ticket," said the purser, with dignity.

"A bright idea!" Kirk smiled grimly; then, turning his pockets wrong side out, continued lightly: "You look me over and if you can find the price of a ticket I'll give you half."

"Then you have lost your money as well as your baggage and your identity?"

"So it would seem."

"Impossible!"

It was plain that the officer was growing angry, so Kirk made haste to say:

"Now let's be friends, at least. By−the−way—pardon the personal nature of the question—but—what size shirt do you wear?"

"Seventeen."

"Saved! Let me have about six, will you?"

"Certainly NOT," returned the other. "I need all I have."

"Miser! Then you must help me find some one my size."

The purser, however, seemed in no mood to go shirt−hunting, and backed out of the door, saying: "I'll have a

look for your baggage, Mr.—Anthony, and I'll see the captain about this ticket, also. I don't know whether you're making fun of me or not, but— I'll look you up later."

He departed, shaking his head as if this were a form of insanity he had never before encountered. A moment later Kirk followed him and made a round of the deck, staring at each man he met and mentally estimating the girth of his neck; but it seemed that the male passengers of the Santa Cruz were all of medium size, and he saw no one whose appearance held out the slightest hope. He did observe one fellow whose neck seemed as large as his own, but the man looked surly and not too cleanly, and Kirk was not yet desperate enough to bring himself to the point of approaching such a fellow for such a favor. He thought of appealing directly to the captain, but promptly remembered that he was a small, wiry man whose wardrobe could by no possible chance afford him relief. At last he made his way toward the smoking−room, determined to enlist the help of his new acquaintance, Stein.

Midway aft, he paused. A girl had emerged from the deck−house ahead of him, whose appearance was sufficiently striking to divert him, momentarily at least, from his quest. She was well above the usual height, quite slender, yet of an exquisite rounded fulness, while her snug−fitting tailor−made gown showed the marks of a Redfern or a Paquin. He noted, also, that her stride was springy and athletic and her head well carried. Feeling that friendly approval with which one recognizes a member of his own kind, Kirk let his eyes follow her, then retraced his way around the deck in the hope of meeting her face to face.

A woman frequently betrays her beauty by the poise of her head, by the turn of her neck, or the lines of her figure, just as truly as by a full glimpse of her features. Hence it was that Anthony felt a certain pleasurable expectancy as he crossed in front of the deck−house, realizing that she was approaching. But when they had met and passed he went his way vaguely disappointed. Instead of a girl, as the first sight of her youthful figure had led him to expect, he had seen a woman of perhaps forty. There was little in her countenance to reveal her age except a certain settled look that does not go with girlhood, and, while no one could have thought her plain, she was certainly not so handsome as he had imagined from a distance. Yet the face was attractive. The eyes were wide−set, gray, and very clear, the mouth large enough to be expressive. Her hair shone in the morning sun with a delicate bronze lustre like that of a turkey's wing. It did not add to the young man's comfort to realize that her one straight, casual glance in passing had taken him in from his soiled collar to his somewhat extreme patent leathers with the tan tops and pearl buttons.

Being very young himself and of limited social experience, he classed all women as either young or old—there was no middle ground. So he dismissed her from his thoughts and continued his search for a number seventeen shirt, and collar to match. But he did not fare well. He found Mr. Stein in the smoking−room, but discovered that his size was fifteen and a half; and there was no one else to whom he could apply.

For a second time Stein importuned him to buy a chance on the ship's run, and, failing in this, suggested that they have a drink together. Had not Kirk realized in time his inability to reciprocate he would have accepted eagerly, for his recent dissipation had left him curiously weak and nervous. At the cost of an effort, however, he refused. It was a rare experience for him to refuse anything, being, like many indolent youths, an accomplished guest. In fact, he was usually as ready to accept favors as he was carelessly generous when he happened to be in funds. The technique of receiving comes to some people naturally; others cannot assume an obligation without giving offence. Kirk was one of the former. Yet now he felt a sudden, strange hesitancy and a self−consciousness that made graceful acquiescence impossible. He continued firm, therefore, even when Stein gibed at him good−humoredly:

"I suppose it's against your principles to drink, as well as to gamble?"

"Exactly."

"That's good, after the way you came aboard."

"How did I come aboard?"

"Oh, I didn't see you, but I heard about it."

Kirk flushed uncomfortably, muttering: "The acoustics of this ship are great. A man can't fall asleep but what somebody hears it."

Stein laughed: "Don't get sore; all ships are alike—we have to talk about something. Sorry I can't help you with the shirt question. Deuced careless of them to lose your luggage."

"Yes! It makes one feel about as comfortable as a man with a broken arm and the prickly heat. Something's got to be done about it, that's all." He glared enviously at the well−dressed men about the room.

Over in a corner, propped against the leather upholstery, was Mr. Cortlandt, as pale, as reserved, and as saturnine as at breakfast. He was sipping Scotch−and−soda, and in all the time that Anthony remained he did not speak to a soul save the waiter, did not shift his position save to beckon for another drink. Something about his sour, introspective aloofness displeased the onlooker, who shortly returned to the deck.

The day was warming up, and on the sunny side of the ship the steamer chairs were filling. Two old men were casting quoits; a noisy quartette was playing shuffle−board. After idling back and forth for a time, Kirk selected a chair and stretched himself out; but he was scarcely seated before the deck steward approached him and said:

"Do you wish this chair for the voyage, sir?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'll put your name on it."

"Anthony, Suite A, third floor, front."

"Very well, sir." The man wrote out a card and fitted it to the back of the chair, saying, "One dollar, if you please."

"What?"

"The price of the chair is one dollar."

"I haven't got a dollar."

The steward laughed as if to humor his passenger. "I'm afraid then you can't have the chair."

"So I must stand up all the way to Panama, eh?"

"You are joking, sir. I'll have to pay it myself, if you don't."

"That's right—make me as uncomfortable as possible. By−the−way, what size collar do you wear?"

"Sixteen."

Kirk sighed. "Send the purser to me, will you? I'll fix up the chair matter with him."

While he was talking he heard the rustle of skirts close by and saw the woman he had met earlier seating herself next to him. With her was a French maid bearing a rug in her hands. It annoyed the young man to realize that out of all the chairs on deck he had selected the one nearest hers, and he would have changed his position had he not been too indolent. As it was, he lay idly listening to her words of direction to the maid; but as she spoke in French, he was undecided whether she was telling her companion that bad weather was imminent, or that the laundry needed counting—his mind, it seemed, ran to laundry.

Then the purser appeared. "Did you send for me?" he inquired.

"Yes. There was a strange man around just now, and he wanted a dollar for this chair."

"Well?"

"I want to establish a line of credit."

The purser grunted.

"And say!" Kirk ran on, seriously. "I've been all over your little ship, but the passengers are boys' size. I can't wear this collar any longer."

"And I can't find any baggage of yours."

"Then there isn't any. I never really expected there was. Come now, be a good fellow. This is my 'case shirt."

"If you really wish some clothes, I'll see what I can find among the stewards."

"No, no," Kirk hastily interposed, "I can't wear a shirt with soup stains on it. Let me have one of yours—we're twin brothers."

"I have no more than I need," said the purser, coldly. He opened a cigarette case, at which Anthony gazed longingly. It seemed ages since he had had a smoke; but the other seemed disinclined for small courtesies.

"I've seen the captain about that ticket matter," he went on, "and he says you must buy another."

Kirk shook his head languidly. "Once more I tell you there is nothing doing."

The officer broke out with some heat: "If you are joking, you've carried this thing far enough. If you are really strapped, as you say you are, how does it happen that you are occupying the best suite on the ship?"

"It is a long story."

"Humph! You will have to give up those quarters and go forward."

"Why? You have your money for that ticket?"

"Yes, but you're not Mr. Locke."

Kirk smiled meditatively. "How do you know?" he queried.

"Good heavens! You've told me so a dozen—"

"Ah! Then you have nothing except my word. Well, sir, now that I come to think it over, I believe my name is Locke, after all." He grinned. "Anyhow, I love my little room and I think I'll keep it. Please don't be peevish. I want you to do me a favor." He removed the ring from his finger, and, handing it to the Purser, said "I want you to get me two diamonds' and a ruby's worth of shirts and collars; and also a safety razor. My mind has stopped working, but my whiskers continue to grow."

The officer managed to say with dignity: "You wish to raise money on this, I presume? Very well, I'll see what can be done for you, Mr. Locke." As he turned away, Kirk became conscious that the woman in the next chair had let her book fall and was watching him with amused curiosity. Feeling a sudden desire to confide in some one, he turned his eyes upon her with such a natural, boyish smile that she could not take offence, and began quite as if he had known her for some time:

"These people are money−mad, aren't they? Worst bunch of gold− diggers I ever saw." Surprised, she half raised her book, but Kirk ran on: "Anybody would think I was trying to find a missing will instead of a shirt. That purser is the only man on the ship my size, and he distrusts me."

The woman murmured something unintelligible. "I hope you don't mind my speaking to you," he added. "I'm awfully lonesome. My name is Anthony, Kirk Anthony."

Evidently the occupant of the next chair was not a football enthusiast, for, although she bowed her acknowledgment, her face showed that the name carried no significance.

"I understood you to tell the purser your name was Locke," said she, in a very low−pitched, well−modulated voice. "I couldn't help overhearing."

"But it isn't really, it's Anthony. I'm the undignified heir to the stocks and bonds of an old party by that name who lives in Albany."

"Darwin K. Anthony?" questioned she, quickly. "Is he your father?" Her face lighted with a flash of genuine interest.

Kirk nodded. "He's my prodigal father and I'm the fatted son. Do you know the governor?"

"Yes, slightly."

"Well, what do you think of that? He's a great old party, isn't he?" He chuckled irrepressibly. "Did you ever hear him swear?"

The woman shook her head with a smile. "I hardly know him well enough for that."

"Oh, he's a free performer; he swears naturally; can't help it. Everybody knows he doesn't mean anything. It's funny, isn't it, with all his credit, that I can't get a shirt until I put up a diamond ring? He could buy a railroad with half that security."

"You are joking, are you not?"

"No indeed. I never needed a shirt so badly in my life. You see, I didn't intend to take this trip; I didn't even know I had sailed. When I woke up I thought this was a hotel. I've got no more baggage than a robin."

"Really?" The woman by now had closed her book and was giving him her full attention, responding to some respectful quality in his tone that robbed his frankness of offence. "How did it happen?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I got drunk—just plain drunk. I didn't think so at the time, understand, for I'd never been the least bit that way before. Hope I don't shock you?"

His new acquaintance shrugged her shoulders. "I have seen something of the world; I'm not easily shocked."

"Well, I was perfectly sober the last I remember, and then I woke up on the Santa Cruz. I'd never even heard the name before."

"And hadn't you intended taking an ocean trip?"

"Good Lord, no! I had just bought a new French car and was going to drive it up to New Haven yesterday. It's standing out on Forty− fifth Street now, if somebody hasn't stolen it. Gee! I can see the news−boys cutting their monograms in those tires."

"How remarkable!"

"You see, it was a big night—football game, supper, and all that. I remember everything up to a certain point, then—curtain! I was 'out' for twelve hours, and SICK!—that's the funny part; I'm still sick." He shook his head as if at a loss what to make of this phenomenon. He noted how the woman's countenance lighted at even a passing interest, as he continued: "What I can't understand is this: It took all my money to pay for the supper, and yet I

wake up with a first−class ticket to Panama and in possession of one of the best suites on the ship. It's a problem play."

"You say you were sick afterward?"

"WAS I?" Kirk turned his eyes upon the speaker, mournfully. "My head isn't right yet."

"You were drugged," said the woman.

"By Jove!" He straightened up in his chair. "Knockouts!"

"Exactly. Some one drugged you and bought a ticket—"

"Wait! I'm beginning to see. It was Locke. That's how I got his name. This is his ticket. Oh! There's going to be something doing when I get back."

"What?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to sit right here and brood upon some fitting revenge. After that chap gets out of the hospital—"

"You did not impress me as a college student," said the stranger.

"I'm not. I graduated four years ago. I barely made it, but I did get through."

"And you have never been to the tropics?"

"Not since I had my last row with the governor. Have you?"

"Many times. It will prove an interesting trip for you. At least you have that consolation."

"What is it like?"

Evidently the artless effrontery of the young man had not offended, for his neighbor talked freely, and in a short time the two were conversing as easily as old acquaintances. This was due, perhaps, to the fact that he had appealed to her with the same frankness he would have used toward a man and, thus far at least, had quite ignored her sex. She was sufficiently quick to appreciate the footing thus established, and allowed herself to meet him half−way. Had he presumed in the slightest, she would have chilled him instantly; but, as it was, she seemed to feel the innate courtesy back of his boldness, seeing in him only a big, unaffected boy who needed an outlet for his feelings. In the same way, had a fine St. Bernard dog thrust a friendly head beneath her hand she would have petted it.

When at last she rose, after an hour that had swiftly sped, she was gratified at the look of concern that came into his eyes. She looked at him with genuine approval as he bowed and said:

"Thank you for the pointers about Panama. I hope I may have the pleasure of talking to you again."

When she had disappeared he murmured, admiringly:

"Jove! She's a corker! And she's not so old, after all. I wonder who she—" He leaned over and read the card on the back of her steamer chair. "Mrs. Stephen Cortlandt, Suite B," it was lettered. Straightening up, he grumbled with genuine disappointment: "Just my blamed luck! She's MARRIED."

V. A REMEDY IS PROPOSED

By pledging his one article of jewelry Kirk became possessed that afternoon of several shirts, collars, and handkerchiefs—likewise a razor, over which he exercised a sort of leasehold privilege. The purser made it plain, however, that he had not sold these articles, but merely loaned them, holding the ring as security for their return, and this arrangement allowed Kirk no spare cash whatever. Even with all his necessities paid for, it surprised him to find how many channels remained for spending money. For instance, the most agreeable loafing spot on the ship was the smoking−room, but whenever he entered it he was invited to drink, smoke, or play cards, and as he was fond of all these diversions, it required such an effort of will to refuse that it destroyed all the pleasure of good company. It was very hard always to be saying no; and in addition it excited his disgust to learn that he had inadvertently founded a reputation for abstemiousness.

Before long he discovered that the passengers considered him an exceptionally sober, steady youth of economical habits, and this enraged him beyond measure. Every tinkle of ice or hiss of seltzer made his mouth water, the click of poker chips drew him with magnetic power. He longed mightily to "break over" and have a good time. It was his first effort at self−restraint, and the warfare became so intense that he finally gave up the smoking−room almost entirely, and spent his hours on deck, away from temptation. He suffered most, perhaps, from the lack of tobacco, but even in the matter of cigarettes he could not bring himself to accept favors that he could not return. In the solitude of his richly appointed suite he collected a few cork−bound stumps, which he impaled on a toothpick in order to light them.

Meanwhile he amused himself by baiting the purser. He dogged that serious−minded gentleman through all his waking hours, finding a rare delight in playing upon his suspicion and lack of humor. To him Kirk was always Mr. Locke, while he insisted upon being called Mr. Anthony by the others, and the officer never quite got the hang of it. Moreover, the latter was full of dignity, and did not relish being connected with a certainly dubious and possibly criminal character, yet dared not resort to rudeness as a means of riddance.

The situation was trying enough to the young man at best; for the ship's hirelings began to show a lack of interest in his comfort, once it became known that he did not tip, and he experienced difficulty in obtaining even the customary attentions. It was annoying to one who had never known an unsatisfied whim; but Kirk was of a peculiarly sanguine temperament that required much to ruffle, and looked upon the whole matter as a huge joke. It was this, perhaps, that enabled him to make friends in spite of his unsociable habits, for the men liked him. As for the women, he avoided them religiously, with the exception of Mrs. Cortlandt, whom he saw for an hour or two, morning and afternoon, as well as at meal−times. With her he got on famously, finding her nearly as entertaining as a male chum, though he never quite lost his dislike for her husband. Had she been unmarried and nearer his own age, their daily intimacy might have caused him to become self− conscious, but, under the circumstances, no such thought occurred to him, and he began to look forward with pleasure to their hours on deck.

The Santa Cruz was four days out before Cortlandt joined them, and when he did he merely nodded casually to Kirk, then, after exchanging a polite word or two with his wife, lapsed into his customary silence, while Mrs. Cortlandt continued her conversation without a second glance in her husband's direction.

"That's what I call an ideal married couple," Kirk reflected— "complete understanding, absolute confidence." And the more he saw of them, the stronger this impression grew. Cortlandt was always attentive and courteous, without being demonstrative, while his wife showed a charming graciousness that was plainly unassumed. Their perfect good−breeding made the young man feel at ease; but though he endeavored to cultivate the husband on several occasions, he made little headway. The man evidently possessed a wide knowledge of current events, a keen understanding of men and things, yet he never opened up. He listened, smiled, spoke rarely, and continued to spend nine−tenths of his time in that isolated corner of the smoking−room, with no other company than a long glass and a siphon.

One day when Kirk had begun to feel that his acquaintance with Mrs. Cortlandt was well established, he said to her:

"Stein told me to−day that your husband is in the diplomatic service."

"Yes," said she. "He was Consul−General to Colombia several years ago, and since then he has been to France

and to Germany."

"I thought you were tourists—you have travelled so much."

"Most of our journeys have been made at the expense of the Government."

"Are you diplomatting now?"

"In a way. We shall be in Panama for some time."

"This Stein seems to be a nice fellow. He's taken quite a liking to me."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed lightly. "That is part of his business."

"How so?"

"He is one of Colonel Jolson's secret agents."

"Who is Colonel Jolson?"

"Chairman of the Isthmian Canal Commission. Your father knows him."

"Do you mean that Stein is a—detective?" Kirk looked uncomfortable.

"I do! Does he know you are the son of Darwin K. Anthony?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so."

"Colonel Jolson will be interested."

"Again I don't see the point."

"Your father is one of the most powerful and aggressive railroad men in the country. Perhaps you know something about the railroad opposition to the canal?"

Kirk smiled. "Well, to tell you the truth," said he, "the governor doesn't consult me about his business as much as he ought to. He seems to think he can run it all right without me, and we've only been speaking over the telephone lately."

"One of the strongest forces the Government had to combat in putting through the canal appropriations was the railroads. Colonel Jolson has no reason to love your father."

"Yes, but *I* don't object to this canal. I think it must be a rather good idea."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed for a second time. "The Colonel's dislike for your father will not affect you, inasmuch as you are returning so soon, but if you intended to stay it might be different."

"In what way?"

"Oh, in many ways. There are two classes of people who are not welcomed on the Canal Zone—magazine writers and applicants for positions who have political influence back of them. The former are regarded as muckrakers, the latter as spies."

"That's rather rough on them, isn't it?"

"You must understand that there is a great big human machine behind the digging of this canal, and, while it is more wonderful by far than the actual machinery of iron and steel, it is subject to human weaknesses. Men like Colonel Jolson, who form a part of it, are down here to make reputations for themselves. They are handicapped and vexed by constant interference, constant jealousy. It is a survival of the fittest, and I suppose they feel that they must protect themselves even if they use underhand means to do so. It is so in all big work of this character, where the individual is made small. You would find the same condition in your father's railroad organization."

"Oh, now! My old man is a pretty tough citizen to get along with, but he wouldn't hire detectives to spy on his employees."

Mrs. Cortlandt smiled. "By−the−way, when are you going into business with him?" she said.

"I? Oh, not for a long time. You see, I'm so busy I never seem to have time to work. Work doesn't really appeal to me, anyway. I suppose if I had to hustle I could, but—what's the use?"

"What is it that keeps you so busy? What are you going to do when you get back, for instance?"

"Well, I'm going to Ormond for the auto races, and I may enter my new car. If I don't get hurt in the races I'll take a hunting trip or two. Then I want to try out an iceboat on the Hudson, and I'll have to be back in New Haven by the time the baseball squad limbers up. Oh, I have plenty of work ahead!"

Mrs. Cortlandt let her eyes dwell upon him curiously for a moment; then she said:

"Have you no ambition?"

"Certainly."

"What is it?"

"Why—" Kirk hesitated. "I can't say right off the reel, but I've got it—lots of it."

"Is there no—girl, for instance? Have you never been in love?"

"Oh, see here, now!" Anthony blushed in a manner to excite the envy of any woman. "I don't like 'em. I'd rather play football."

"That explains something. When the time comes you will cease wasting your life and—"

"I'm NOT wasting my life," the young man denied hotly. "I'm having a great time; simply immense."

"I remember reading an article once by a man who attacked American colleges with bitter personal feeling, on the ground that they fostered exactly the attitude toward life which you have just expressed."

Anthony looked sober. "That was my father," he said.

"Really! How stupid of me to forget the name. But I don't agree with him," she continued, gently. "You merely lack stimulus. If you should meet the right woman—" Then, seeing the amusement in his face; "Believe me, I know what I am talking about. I know what a woman can do. Your life has been too easy and placid. You need some disturbing element to make it ferment."

"But I don't want to ferment."

"Why don't you stay in Panama and go to work?"

"Work? Hideous word! For one thing, I haven't time. I must get back—"

"You will find great opportunities there."

"But how about the girl who is to sour the syrup of my being and make it ferment?"

"Oh, she may appear at any moment; but, joking aside, you had better think over what I have said." She left him with an admonitory shake of her head.

The SANTA CRUZ was now rapidly drawing out of the cold northern winter and into a tropic warmth. Already the raw chill of higher latitudes was giving way to a balmy, spring−like temperature, while the glittering sunshine transformed the sea into a lively, gleaming expanse of sapphire. The nights were perfect, the days divine. The passengers responded as if to a magic draught, and Kirk found his blood filled with a new vigor.

A brief sight of Columbus' Landfall served to break the monotony; then followed a swift flight past low, tropical islands ringed with coral sand, upon which broke a lazy, milk−white surf. Through the glasses villages were spied, backed by palm groves and guarded by tall sentinel lighthouses; but the Santa Cruz pushed steadily southward, her decks as level as a dancing floor, the melancholy voice of her bell tolling the leagues as they slipped past. The eastern tongue of Cuba rose out of the horizon, then dropped astern, and the gentle trades began to fan the travellers. Now that they were in the Caribbean, schools of flying fish whisked out from under the ship's prow, and away, like tiny silver− sheathed arrows. New constellations rose into the evening sky. It became impossible to rest indoors, with the trade−winds calling, and the passengers spent long, lazy hours basking in the breath of the tropics and grudging the pleasure of which sleep deprived them.

It was the last night of the voyage, and the thrill of approaching land was felt by all. As usual, the monotony of the first day or two had given way to an idle contentment and a vague regret at leaving the ship and severing the ties so newly made. Home, instead of looming close and overshadowing, had become a memory rather indistinct and blurred, clouded by the proximity of the new and unknown.

Kirk Anthony acknowledged to a reluctant enjoyment of the change and found himself less eager to go back. As he paced the deck after dinner he felt a lurking desire to defer his return until he had absorbed something more of this warmth and languor; he even reflected that he might welcome a stay of some length in the tropics if it were not for the fact that he had so much to do.

Mrs. Cortlandt joined him as usual, and they did a mile around the promenade, chatting idly of many things. The evening was too glorious to permit of early retiring, and a late hour found them leaning over the rail, side by side, while Anthony bewailed the fact that he knew nothing of the country just beyond the dark horizon ahead of them.

"You are quite right," his companion agreed. "You will miss its best flavor if you don't know the history back of it. For instance, we are now on the Spanish Main, the traditional home of romance and adventure."

"I always wanted to be a pirate," he acknowledged gravely, "up to fifteen. Then I thought I'd rather run a candy store."

"The ships of Sir Henry Morgan and the galleons of His Catholic Majesty Philip of Spain sailed these waters. Over yonder"—she waved a graceful hand to the north and east—"are the haunts where the adventurers of old England used to lie in wait for their prey. Ahead of us is the land that Pizarro soaked with blood. We're coming

into the oldest country on this side of the globe, Mr. Anthony, where men lived in peace and plenty when most of Europe was a wilderness. I suppose such things appeal more to a woman's fancy than to a man's, but to me they're mightily alluring."

Kirk wagged his head admiringly, as he said:

"I wish I could make language behave like that," and Edith Cortlandt laughed like a young girl.

"Oh, I'm not a perfervid poet," she disclaimed, "but everything down here is so full of association I can't help feeling it."

"I'm beginning to notice it myself. Maybe it's the climate."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, it is all very vivid to me. Did you ever stop to think how brave those men must have been who first went venturing into unknown seas in their little wooden boats?"

"They were looking for a short cut to the East Indies, weren't they?"

"Yes, to Cathay. And then the people they found and conquered! The spoils they exacted! They were men—those conquistadores—whatever else they were—big, cruel, heroic fellows like Bastida, Nicuesa, Balboa, Pedrarias the Assassin, and the rest. They oppressed the natives terribly, yet they paved the way for civilization, after all. The Spaniards did try to uplift the Indians, you know. And the life in the colonies was like that in old Spain, only more romantic and picturesque. Why, whenever I pass through these Latin−American cities I see, in place of the crumbling ruins, grand cathedrals and palaces; in place of the squalid beggars idling about the market−places I see velvet−clad dons and high− born ladies."

"Aren't there any beautiful ladies left?"

"A few, perhaps."

"What happened to the cathedrals and the velvet fellows and all that?"

"Oh, the old state of affairs couldn't last forever. The Spanish administration wasn't so bad as is generally supposed, yet of course there was too much rapacity and not enough industry. Central America, broadly speaking, was known as the treasure−chest of the world, and there were constant wars and disturbances. The colonies as a whole did not progress like those in the North, and in course of time deteriorated. The old cathedrals decayed and were not rebuilt. The old Spanish stock died out and in its stead grew up a motley race given to revolt, revolution, and corruption. Even when the provinces became free, they weren't able to unite and form a strong nation. The Isthmus of Panama became a pest−hole where the scum of the Four Seas settled. The people became mean and unhealthy in mind and body and morals, preserving nothing except the cruelty of their forefathers. Here and there, to be sure, one comes across the old Castilian breed, like a silver thread running through a rotting altar−cloth, but only here and there, and most of those silver threads have become tarnished from contact with the fabric."

"It must be a nice place," Kirk observed with gentle sarcasm.

"It affords one a great chance to moralize, at any rate. Take the building of this canal, for instance. First, the French came, led by a dreamer, and poured in the wealth of an empire in order that they might exact toll from the world. You see, they were all lured by the love of gain—the Spaniards, who pillaged the natives to begin with, and the French, who set out to squeeze profit from all the other nations. But it seems as if the spot were infected. The French lost an army in their project; corruption gnawed through, and the thing ended in disgrace and disaster. Spain and France have come and gone, and at last we Yankees have arrived. It seems to be the will of God that the youngest, lustiest people on the earth should finally be sent to clean this Augean stable."

"By Jove! I never thought of it that way."

"It is a big task, Mr. Anthony, and the mere digging of the ditch is the smallest part. There is a great deal more to be done. You see, as men attain culture, they require more than mere food and drink and bedding, and in the same way, as nations attain to greatness, they require more than mere territory—they reach out and absorb power and prestige. Our decision to build the Panama Canal is like the landing of another Columbus; the conquest is to follow. After that will come—who knows what? Perhaps more wars, more pillage, more injustice."

"You talk like a man," Anthony said, admiringly. "I had no idea you looked at things in such a big way."

"You are laughing at me."

"No, indeed."

"You see, it is part of my husband's profession. As to the romance—well, all women are romantic and imaginative, I suppose, and you've been an inspiring listener."

"I don't know about that, but—you're a corking good talker. Excuse my archaic English." Mrs. Cortlandt

turned her eyes upon the speaker, and he saw that they were very bright. "I've been thinking about what you told me the other day," he ran on, "about myself. Remember?"

"I'm glad I have the knack of making something besides football signals stick in your memory," said she. "Have you been thinking about that girl I spoke of?"

"Yes," he replied, ingenuously. "I've been making up my mind to ask you if you happen to have a sister—an unmarried sister, I mean."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed appreciatively. "No, I have no sister, but I thank you for the compliment. I suppose you meant it for one?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'm quite sure now that my notion about you was right. It will take a woman to make a man of you."

"It used to be my wind that troubled me, said the athlete, mournfully. "Now it seems to be my heart."

"It doesn't seem to be seriously affected as yet, but it's remarkable the number of ways in which the heart of man may be reached. I remember once having breakfast in a queer little restaurant in the French quarter of New Orleans, famous for its cooking and for the well−known people who had eaten there. There was a sort of register which the guests were asked to sign, and in looking it over I read the inscription of one particularly enthusiastic diner. It ran, 'Oh, Madame Begue, your liver has touched my heart,' and the story is that the writer made desperate love to the proprietor's wife."

"Oh, come, that's rather hard on me. I have some emotions besides a hearty appreciation of food."

"No doubt. I only mentioned that as one of the ways, and, seriously, I am convinced that, however your awakening may come, you will be the better for it."

"I do hope the cook will prove to be unmarried," he mused. "Imagine having to do away with a husband who can handle a cleaver."

"Oh, I don't mean you should necessarily marry the woman. It would be quite as good for you if she refused even to look at you. However, let us hope that you meet some nice American girl—"

"Why not a senorita? You have inspired me with Spanish romance."

But Mrs. Cortlandt shook her head. "Wait until you have seen them."

"Already I imagine myself under some moonlit balcony teasing chords out of a guitar. I have rather a good singing voice, you know."

It is not done that way nowadays. Panama is Americanized. You will need a pianola and an automobile."

"And all the romance is gone?"

"Oh, there is romance everywhere; there is quite as much in Pittsburg as in Andalusia. But to speak of more practical things"— Mrs. Cortlandt hesitated slightly—"I heard you tell the purser the other day about your financial troubles, and it occurred to me that Mr. Cortlandt might assist you."

"Thanks, awfully," Kirk hastened to say, feeling himself flush uncomfortably. "But I sha'n't need anything. The old gentleman will wire me whatever I ask for. Does Mr. Cortlandt know how I am fixed?"

"No."

"Please don't tell him. I—I'm a little bit ashamed of myself. You're not going?"

"Yes. It is getting late, and my maid is looking for me."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's lonesome around here without—somebody to talk to." He took her hand and shook it as if she were a man. "You've been mighty good to me and—I wish you had a sister. That's all."

She left him the memory of a very bright and very girlish smile, and he found himself thinking that she could not be so much older than he, after all.

Mr. Cortlandt was awaiting his wife and rose courteously as she entered their suite.

"Did you send Annette for me?" she inquired.

"Yes. I thought you had forgotten the hour. We rise at six."

"My dear," she returned, coolly, "I was quite aware of the time. I was talking to Mr. Anthony."

"Do you find him so amusing?"

"Very much so."

"He's such a boy. By−the−way, some of the passengers are remarking about your friendship for him."

Mrs. Cortlandt shrugged. "I expected that. Does it interest you?"

The man favored her with his wintry smile. "Not at all."

"If he should need assistance while in Panama, I should be obliged if you would accommodate him."

"Money?"

"Yes, or anything else. He left New York unexpectedly."

"Don't you think that is going a bit too far? You know I don't fancy him."

Mrs. Cortlandt frowned slightly. "We won't discuss it," she said. "I assured him he was at liberty to call on us for anything and— naturally that ends the matter."

"Naturally!" he agreed, but his colorless cheeks flushed dully.

VI. IN WHICH KIRK ANTHONY IS GREATLY SURPRISED

When Kirk came on deck early the following morning, he found the Santa Cruz nosing her way into Colony harbor. A land fog obscured his view somewhat, but through it he beheld a low, irregular line of mountains in the background, and close at hand a town. The ship came to anchor abreast of a point upon which he descried a squat little spider−legged lighthouse and long rows of frame dwellings half hidden behind slender palm−trees. Beyond were warehouses and docks and the funnels of many ships; on either side of the bay was a dense tropic wilderness. As the sun dissipated the morning haze, he saw that the hills were matted with a marvellous vivid green. There were no clearings on the slopes, no open spaces dotted with farm−houses or herds, the jungle flowed down to the water's edge in an unbroken sweep, and the town was cut out of it.

A launch came plunging through the swells, and the deck steward made his rounds requesting the passengers to assemble for medical examination.

Kirk found the Cortlandts ahead of him.

"What's coming off?" he inquired.

"Vaccination," Cortlandt explained, briefly. "They are very particular about disease."

His wife added: "This used to be the worst fever−spot in the world, you know. When we were here five years ago, we saw car− loads of dead people nearly every day. A funeral train was a familiar sight."

"What a pleasant place to spend my vacation!" exclaimed Kirk. "Now if I can rent a room over the morgue and board with the village undertaker, I'll have a nice time."

"Oh, there's no more yellow fever—no sickness at all, in fact," said Mr. Cortlandt. "Will you go over to Panama City, or will you stay in Colon?"

"I think I'll remain on the ship; then she can't get away without me," Kirk answered. But when, after taking his turn before the doctors, he explained his desire to the purser, that worthy replied:

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to arrange that with the agent. We make a charge, you know, just like a hotel."

"I'm going to cable my old man for money."

The officer shook his head with finality. "Nothing doing, Mr. Locke."

"Anthony."

"I'll take no chances. If you don't pay, I'll have to. Look here! Do you want to know what I think of you, Mr.—Anthony Locke?"

"I haven't any special yearnings in that direction, but—what do you think about me?"

"Well, I don't think your name is either Locke or Anthony."

"Marvellous!"

"And I don't think you have any money coming to you, either."

"Mighty intellect!"

"I think you are no good."

"You're not alone in that belief. But what has all that to do with my sleeping aboard the Santa Cruz?"

"If you want to stay aboard, you'll have to pay in advance. You're not so foolish as you try to make out."

"Those are glorious words of praise," Kirk acknowledged, "but I'll make a bet with you."

"What?"

"That you change your mind. I am just as foolish as I appear, and I'll prove it. I'll bet my ring against your shirts that my name is Anthony, and if I don't come through with the price of a ticket to New York you can keep the ring."

"Very well, but meanwhile I don't intend to be stuck for your bill." The purser was a man of admirable caution.

"All right, then, I shall throw myself upon the mercy of strangers and take your belongings with me."

By this time the ship was being warped into her berth, and the dock was crowded. There were little brown customs inspectors in khaki, little brown policemen in blue, little brown merchants in white, and huge black Jamaicans in all colors of rags. Here and there moved a bronzed, businesslike American, and Anthony noticed that for the most part these were clean−cut, aggressive−looking young fellows.

He was delayed but an instant by the customs officials, then made his way out through a barnlike structure to the street, reflecting that, after all, there are advantages in travelling light. He came into a blazing−hot, glaring white street jammed with all sorts of vehicles, the drivers of which seemed perpetually upon the point of riot. Before him stretched a shadeless brick pavement, with a railroad track on one side, and on the other a line of naked frame buildings hideous in their sameness. The sun beat down fiercely. Kirk mopped his face with the purser's handkerchief and wondered if this were really December.

Clumsy two−wheeled carts came bumping past, some with prehensile− footed negroes perched upon them, others driven by turban−crowned Hindoos. A fleet of dilapidated surreys and coaches, each equipped with a musical chime and drawn by a flea−bitten, ratlike horse, thronged the square. Kirk noticed with amusement that the steeds were of stronger mentality than the drivers, judging from the way they dominated the place, kicking, biting squealing, ramming one another, locking wheels and blocking traffic, the while their futile owners merely jerked the reins after the fashion of a street−car conductor ringing up fares, or swore softly in Spanish. Silent−footed coolies drifted past, sullen−faced negroes jostled him, stately Martinique women stalked through the confusion with queenly dignity. These last were especially qualified to take the stranger's eye, being tall and slender and wearing gaudy head− dresses, the tips of which stood up like rabbits' ears. Unlike the fat and noisy Jamaicans, they were neat and clean, their skirts snow−white and stiffly starched, and they held themselves as proudly erect as if pacing a stage.

The indescribable confusion of races reminded the young American of a Red Sea port where the myriad peoples of the far East intermingle. He heard a dozen different dialects; even the negroes used an accent that was difficult to understand. One thing only struck a familiar note, and that with peculiar force and sharpness. Down the railroad track toward him came a locomotive with the letters "P. R. R." upon it, at which he said aloud:

"Hurrah, I'm in Jersey City! I'll take the Twenty−third Street Ferry and be at the Astor in no time."

He made his way slowly through the turmoil to the cable office, where he wrote a message, only to have it refused.

"We don't send C. O. D.," the operator told him.

"Must have coin in advance, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"I left my gold−purse on the dresser," Kirk said, cheerfully. "I'll be back later." Then he wandered forth again, bearing his bundle of shirts beneath his arm. He thought of appealing to the Cortlandts before they left for Panama City, but could not bring himself to ask a favor from that slim, agate−eyed man for whom he felt such an instinctive distaste. Instead, he resolved to enlist the services of the American consul.

He began to feel the heat now, and his borrowed collar drooped, but as he neared the seaward side of town there was a remarkable transformation. A delightful, cooling breeze swept in from the ocean, and, when he finally came out upon a palm−guarded road along the breakers, he paused in silent enjoyment. The trade−winds were drawing inward as steadily as if forced by a great electric fan, piling the green waters upon the rocks in a ceaseless, soothing murmur, making the palm fronds overhead rustle like the silken skirts of an aerial ballet. The effect was wonderful, for, while the air was balmy and soft, it was also deliciously refreshing and seemed to have magic properties.

After some further wandering, he found the consul's house and knocked at the door, whereupon a high−pitched, querulous voice from inside cried:

"Come in. Dammit, don't stand there hammering!"

Kirk entered to find a huge, globular man clad in soiled linens sprawled in a musty Morris chair and sipping a highball. The man's face and neck were of a purplish, apoplectic hue; he seemed to radiate heat−waves like a base−burner.

"Is this Mr. Weeks?" Kirk inquired.

"That's me."

"My name is Anthony."

"Glad to meet you," wheezed the fat man, extending a limp, moist hand without rising. When Kirk had grasped it he felt like wiping his own palm. "Have a seat." The speaker indicated a broken−backed rocker encumbered with damp clothes, newspapers, and books. "Just dump that rubbish on the floor; it don't matter where." Then he piped at the top of his thin, little voice, "Zeelah! Hey, Zeelah! Bring some more ice."

One glance showed Anthony that the place was indescribably disordered; a rickety desk was half concealed beneath a litter of papers, books, breakfast dishes, and what not; a typewriter occupied a chair, and all about the floor were scattered documents where the wind had blown them. Shoes and articles of clothing were piled in the corners; there was not a sound piece of furniture in the place, and through an open door leading to another room at the rear could be seen a cheap iron bed, sagging hammock−like, its head and foot posts slanting like tepee poles, doubtless from the weight of its owner.

In answer to Mr. Weeks's shout a slatternly negress with dragging skirts and overrun shoes entered, carrying a washbowl partly filled with ice.

"Just get in, Mr. Anthony?"

"Yes, sir, on the Santa. Cruz."

"Fine ship." Mr. Weeks rose ponderously and wiped out a glass with a bath towel, while Kirk noticed that two damp half−moons had come through his stiffly starched linen trousers where his dripping knees had pressed. He walked with a peculiar, springy roll, as if pads of fat had grown between his joints, and, once an impulse had been given his massive frame, it required time in which to become effective. The sound of his breathing was plainly audible as he prepared his guest's beverage.

"You'll like that," he predicted. "There's one good thing we get in Colon, and that's whiskey." With a palsied hand he presented the glass. His cuffs were limp and tight, his red wrists were ringed like those of a baby. As he rolled back toward the Morris chair, his stomach surged up and down as if about to break from its moorings.

"I came in to ask a favor," Anthony announced, "I suppose every tourist does the same."

"That's part of a consul's duty," Mr. Weeks panted, while his soft cheeks swelled with every exhalation. "That's what I'm here for."

"I want to cable home for money."

"A little poker game on the way down, eh?" He began to shake ponderously.

"I'm broke, and they won't take a collect message at the cable office. You see, I didn't know I was coming; some of my friends gave me a knockout and shipped me off on the Santa Cruz. The wireless wasn't working, we didn't stop at Jamaica, so this is my first chance to get word home."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Cable for me and see that I have a place to stop until I get an answer."

A look of distrust crept slowly into the consul's little eyes.

"Are you absolutely broke?"

"I haven't got a jingle."

"How long will it take to hear from your people?"

"If my father is at home, I'll hear instantly."

"And if he isn't?"

"I'll have to wait."

"What makes you think he'll wire you money?"

"He's never failed yet. You see, I'm something like a comet; he knows I'll be around every so often."

Mr. Weeks began to complain. "I don't know you, Mr.—what's the name again? Anthony? I'm a poor man and I've been an easy mark for every tropical tramp from Vera Cruz to Guayaquil. Your father may not be able to help you, and then I'll be holding the bag."

"I think you don't understand who he is. Did you ever hear of Darwin K. Anthony, of Albany, New York?"

Mr. Weeks's thick lids opened, this time to display a far different emotion. "Certainly."

"Well, he's the goat."

Slowly, grandly, the American consul set his frame in motion, whereat Kirk said, quickly, "Don't get up; I understand." But Mr. Weeks had gone too far to check himself, so he lurched resiliently into an upright position, then across the floor, and, reaching out past his undulating front, as a man reaches forth from the midst of a crowd, shook his guest heartily by the hand.

"Why didn't you say so?" he bubbled. "I'm here to accommodate folks like you. Darwin K. Anthony! Well, RATHER."

"Thanks." The young man wiped his hand surreptitiously. "If you will fix it so I can cable him and sleep aboard the ship, I'll be greatly obliged."

"Nothing of the sort," Mr. Weeks blew through his wet lips. "I'll cable him myself and you'll stay right here as my guest. Delighted to have the privilege."

Kirk cast another glance over the place, and demurred hastily. "Really, I couldn't think of putting you out. I can stay on the Santa Cruz as well as not."

"I couldn't hear to such a thing. You're tired of ship life— everybody is—and I have lots of room—too much room. It's a pleasure to meet real people—this damn country is so full of crooks and dead−beats. No, sir, you'll stay right here where it is cool and comfortable." With a pudgy forefinger he stripped his purple brow of a row of glistening sweat−drops. "I'll have Zeelah fix up a bed where this glorious breeze will play on you. Mr. Anthony, that trade−wind blows just like that all the time—never dies down—it's the only thing that makes life bearable here—that and the whiskey. Have another highball?"

"No, I thank you."

"Darwin—Say, I'll send a cart for your baggage, right now."

"I have it with me—six shirts, all guilty."

"Then I'll send your father a message this minute. I'm delighted at the privilege of being the first to advise him of your safety and to relieve his mental anguish." Mr. Weeks rocked toward the desk, adjusted a chair behind him, spread his legs apart, and sat down sidewise so that he could reach the inkwell. He overhung his chair so generously that from the front he appeared to be perched precariously upon its edge or to be holding some one in his lap. "Where are those cable blanks!" he cried, irritably, stirring up the confusion in front of him.

"Here they are." Anthony picked one up from the floor.

"It's that damn wind again. I can't keep anything in place unless I sit on it. That's the trouble with this country—there's always a breeze blowing. Thanks! I'm getting a trifle heavy to stoop— makes me dizzy."

In a moment he read what he had written:

DARWIN K. ANTHONY, Albany, New York.

Your son well and safe. Here as my guest. Asks you cable him money for return. WEEKS, American Consul.

"That tells the story. It'll please him to know I'm looking after you, my boy."

"You are very kind."

"Don't speak of it. I'm glad to get in touch with your father. We need capital in this country."

"He's a hard man in money matters," said Darwin K. Anthony's son. "I believe I enjoy the distinction of being the only person who ever made him loosen."

"All successful men are cautious," Weeks declared. "But if he knew the wonderful opportunities this country presents—" The speaker leaned forward, while his chair creaked dangerously, and said, with impressiveness, "My dear sir, do you realize that a cocoa palm after it is seven years old drops a nut worth five cents every day in the year and requires no care whatever except to gather the fruit?"

"No."

"Fact! And we grow the best ones in the world right here. But the demand is increasing so rapidly that in ten years there will be a famine. Think of it—a famine of cocoanuts!" Mr. Weeks paused to lend dramatic effect.

"That's fierce," Kirk acknowledged. "What are they good for?"

"Eating! People make cakes out of them, and oil, and candy. Good cocoanut land can be bought for fifty cents an acre, selected seeds for five cents each, labor is sixty cents a day. No frosts, no worms, no bugs. You sit still and they drop in your lap."

"The bugs?"

"No! No! The cocoanuts."

"Fine!"

"But that's nothing. Do you realize that this soil will raise sugar−cane the size of your—of my—thigh, and once you plant it you can't keep it cut out?"

"It's all news to me."

"You can buy sugar−cane land for a dollar an acre; it costs—" "I'm no good at figures, Mr. Weeks."

"And rubber! THERE'S the chance for a man with capital. Rubber!"

"I will—I mean, is that so?"

"Ever see any rubber−trees?"

"Only in Brooklyn."

"I mean wild rubber. This country is full of it; the natives bring it in. All you have to do is buy timber land—you can get it for a song—plant your rubber−seed, and let 'er go, Gallagher! In ten years you go back, cut off your timber, sell it for enough to make you rich, and there is your rubber—velvet!" he concluded, triumphantly.

"Rubber velvet?"

"Yes. It's 'velvet'—all clear. You can't lose. My boy, there's a thousand ways to get rich down here, and I know 'em all. What I need is capital. If I had your father's backing—Say! It's a mighty good thing you came to see me. I can do your old man a lot of good. I'm conservative, I am, and what he needs is a good, conservative man to manage his investments. Why, talk about quick money"—the speaker thrust forth a finger that looked like a peeled banana—"I've got a gold−mine—"

"Not a bit like it." Kirk shook his head. "They don't behave."

"This one will. It's an old Spanish mine and hasn't been worked for three centuries. It's rich, RICH! I'll take you in as my partner, and we'll get your father to open it up. What do you say? If he doesn't like that, we'll get him a street−railway franchise; I'm close to the government, and there isn't a steel rail in any city of the republic. I know all the Spiggoty politicians."

"The what?" "The Spiggoties! That's what we call the Panamanians. They 'no spiggoty English'; understand?"

"It's a funny name."

"Now, my boy, there's one thing I want you to be careful of. Don't let some of these fellows around here get you excited. This country is full of promoters, cheap skates, and that sort, and they'll try to stampede you into some investment. You trust to me; I'm conservative. I'll put you up at the club, and when you get straightened around we'll talk business. Meanwhile, I'll send this cable."

Mr. Weeks was even better than his word. He took Kirk with him, and went heaving down the street, his body quivering at every step as if hung upon a whalebone framework, the breath wheezing noisily in and out of his chest, the perspiration streaming from his purple face in rivulets. He put up his guest at the club and invited some of his friends to join them for dinner that evening on the wide balcony; then, noting Anthony's heavy clothing, he said:

"You need some linens, Kirk. That suit looks like a dog bed. You don't mind my calling you Kirk, do you?"

"I'm flattered. However, I can't get ready−made clothes large enough, and, besides, it's hardly worth while for the length of time—"

"Nonsense. Now you're here we won't let you go right back. There's a Chinese tailor on Bottle Alley who'll have you a suit to measure by noon to−morrow, and he only charges seven dollars, goods and all."

Accordingly, the two journeyed to Bottle Alley and selected some linen, whereupon, instead of one suit, the consul ordered three, having them charged to his account.

Kirk really enjoyed that evening at the Wayfarers Club, for, once the cool of evening had come, the place filled up rapidly with as fine a crowd of men as he had ever met. There were young fellows from the railroad offices, merchants from the town, engineers from the big job, the proximity of which made itself felt like a mysterious presence. There was a trader from down the San Blas coast; a benevolent, white−haired judge, with a fund of excellent stories; a lieutenant in the Zone Police who impressed Kirk as a real Remington trooper come to life; and many another. They all welcomed the Yale man with that freedom which one finds only on the frontier, and as he listened to them he began to gain some idea of the tremendous task that occupied their minds. They were all men with work to do; there were no idlers; there was no class distinction. One topic of conversation prevailed, and, although the talk drifted away from it at times, it invariably came back to The Job in the end.

Weeks did himself credit as a host. His table, spread on the latticed balcony where the never−failing trade−winds fanned it, was decorated tastefully with flowers, red−shaded candles, white linen, and gleaming silver gave it a metropolitan air. Both the food and the wine were well served, and the consul's half−dozen guests soon became mellowed and friendly. Kirk felt he had fallen among kindred spirits, for it was almost like a fraternity dinner.

When finally they arose, some one proposed a game of draw poker and insisted upon Kirk's joining. He was about to refuse when Weeks drew him aside to say:

"Don't let the money question stand in your way, Kirk. You're my guest, and your I.O.U. is as good as a government bond; so go as far as you like."

A considerable portion of Anthony's time in college had been devoted to a course in draw poker—recitations, so to speak, being conducted in the upper rooms of a Greek letter "frat," and he cherished the belief that he had at least learned to distinguish a spade flush from an "Arkansas blaze." But he soon found that these men had forgotten more about the game than he could ever hope to learn at any university, and when the crowd broke up at midnight he signed his name to a tab for forty dollars.

Early the next day the following cablegram was left at the American Consulate:

WEEKS, Consul, Colon.

Anthony absent, returns Friday.

COPLEY.

"Copley is the Governor's secretary," Kirk explained. "That means that I'll miss the Santa Cruz and have to wait another week."

"I'm delighted," the consul said, heartily.

"Perhaps you could stake me to a ticket. I'll remit when I get to New York."

"My pay isn't due for a fortnight," Weeks explained after an instant's hesitation. "You see, I'm interested in so many ventures it keeps me—well, broke. Anyhow, you can't go until we have arranged an investment for your father."

Kirk could not help thinking that a man of the consul's wide acquaintance and business capacity could have raised the necessary funds without much trouble; but, not wishing to embarrass his host, he refrained from pressing the matter, and resigned himself as best he could to an extension of his exile. Meanwhile, he decided to visit the Canal, for on every side he heard nothing but echoes of the great work, and he began to feel that he owed it to himself to view it. But his plans were upset by the weather. On the following day it began to rain, and it continued to rain day and night thereafter until Colon became a sodden, dripping horror. The soil melted into a quagmire, the streets became sluices, the heavens closed down like a leaden pall, and the very air became saturated. It was hot also, and sticky. Indoors a mould began to form, rust grew like a fungus; outdoors the waving palm tops spilled a deluge upon roof and sidewalk at every gust; their trunks streamed like hydrants.

Kirk had never seen such a rain; it kept up hour after hour, day after day, until the monotony became maddening. The instant he stepped out from shelter he was drenched, and even in his rooms he could discover no means of drying his clothes. His garments, hanging beside his bed at night, were clammy and overlaid with moisture in the morning. Things began to smell musty; leather objects grew long, hoary whiskers of green mould. To his amazement, the inhabitants seemed quite oblivious to the change, however, and, while they agreed that the weather was a trifle misty, they pursued their duties as usual, assuring him that the rain might continue for a month.

It was too much for Kirk, however, and he deferred his trip over the "Line," spending his time instead at the Wayfarers Club. In his daylight hours he listened to Weeks's unending dissertations upon the riches of the tropics; at night he played poker with such uniform bad luck that his opponents developed for him an increasing affection.

But all things have an end, and Friday morning broke clear and hot.

"We'll hear from the old gentleman to−day, sure," he told Weeks at breakfast. "He's regularity itself. The train despatchers set their watches by him."

"Now that it has cleared off, we must look into the cocoanut business," the consul announced. "I'll make you a rich man, Kirk."

"I'm rich, anyhow, or I will be. Money doesn't mean much to me."

"Your father is—many times a millionaire, isn't he?" Weeks' little red eyes were very bright and curious. Kirk had seen that look many times before and knew its meaning. Hence he replied rather brusquely:

"So I believe." And a moment later declared his determination to avail himself of the good weather and see something of the town. The prospect of squaring his account with this fawning fat man filled him with relief, and once away from the Consulate he stayed until late in the afternoon. It was nearly dark when he strolled in, to inquire:

"Well, did you get an answer?"

"Yes." Weeks fumbled excitedly through the papers on his desk.

"How much did he send?

"Here's the message; read it yourself."

Kirk read as follows:

WEEKS, Consul, Colon.

Your guest an impostor. Have no son.

ANTHONY.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he ejaculated. "This is a joke!"

Weeks was beginning to pant. "A joke, hey? I suppose it was a joke to impose on me?"

"Don't you believe I'm Kirk Anthony?"

"No, I do not. I just discovered to−day that your name is Jefferson Locke. Stein told me."

Anthony laughed lightly.

"Oh, laugh, if you want to. You're a smooth article with your talk about football and automobiles and millionaire fathers, but you happened to select the wrong millionaire for a father this time, and I'm going to give you a taste of our Spiggoty jails."

"You can't arrest me. You offered to take me in."

The fat man grew redder than ever; he seemed upon the point of exploding; his whole body shook and quivered as if a head of steam were steadily gathering inside him.

"You can't get out of it that way," he cried at the top of his little voice. "I've fed you for a week. I put you up at my club. That very suit of clothes you have on is mine."

"Well, don't burst a seam over the matter. My Governor doesn't know the facts. I'll cable him myself this time."

"And live off me for another week, I suppose? Not if I know it! He says he has no son; isn't that enough?"

"He doesn't understand."

"And how about those gambling debts?" chattered the mountain of flesh. "You thought you'd fool me for a week, while you won enough money from my friends to get away. Now I'LL have to pay them. Oh, I'll fix you!"

"You go slow about having me pinched," Kirk said, darkly, "or I'll make you jump through a hoop. I'll pay my debts."

"You're a rich man, eh? Money doesn't mean much to you, hey?" mocked the infuriated Consul. "I suppose this is an old game of yours. Well, you stuck me all right, because you knew I couldn't have you arrested—I'd be a laughing−stock forever. But I've had your card cancelled, and I've left word for the waiters to throw you out if you show up at the Wayfarers."

"Will you lend me enough money to cable again?" asked Anthony, with an effort.

"More money? NO!" fairly screamed the other. "You get out of my house, Mr. 'Kirk Anthony,' and don't you show yourself around here again. I'll keep the rest of your wardrobe."

His erstwhile guest underwent an abrupt reversal of emotion. To the indignant amazement of Mr. Weeks, he burst into a genuine laugh, saying:

"All right, landlord, keep my baggage. I believe that's the custom, but—Oh, gee! This IS funny." He was still laughing when he reached the public square, for at last he had begun to see the full humor of Adelbert Higgins' joke.

VII. THE REWARD OF MERIT

Facing for the first time in his life an instant and absolute need of money, Kirk found himself singularly lacking in resource; and a period of sober contemplation brought him no helpful thought. Perhaps, after all, he decided, his best course would be to seek relief from the Cortlandts. Accordingly, he strolled into the offices of the steamship company near by and asked leave to telephone. But on calling up the Hotel Tivoli, he was told that his friends were out; nor could he learn the probable hour of their return. As he hung up the receiver he noticed that the office was closing, and, seeing the agent about to quit the place, addressed him:

"I'd like to ask a favor."

"What is it?"

"Will you introduce me to the best hotel in town? I have friends in Panama City, but they're out and it's getting late."

"There isn't a good hotel here, but you don't need an introduction; just walk in. They're not full."

"I'm broke, and I have no baggage."

"Don't you know anybody?"

"I know the American consul—been stopping at his house for a week—but he threw me out."

A great light seemed suddenly to dawn upon the agent. "Oh, you're Locke!" said he, with the air of one who detects a fraud too obvious to be taken seriously. "Now I understand. The purser on the Santa Cruz told me about you. Sorry I can't help you, but I'm a salaried man."

"I've got to sleep," stoutly maintained the other. "Somebody will have to take care of me; I can't sit up all night."

"See here, my friend, I don't know what your game is, but you can't sting me." The agent finished locking up, then walked away, leaving his visitor to reflect anew upon the average human being's ignoble lack of faith in his fellows.

It was growing dark. From farther down the water−front the lights of the Wayfarers Club shone invitingly, and Kirk decided to appeal there for assistance. In spite of Weeks's warning, he felt sure he could prevail upon some of the members to tide him over for the night, but as he neared the place he underwent a sudden change of heart. Slowly mounting the stairs ahead of him like a trained hippopotamus was the colossal, panting figure of the American consul, at sight of which Kirk's pride rose up in arms and forbade him to follow. Doubtless Weeks had spread his story broadcast; it was manifestly impossible for him to appeal to his recent card partners—they would believe he had deliberately imposed upon them. It was humiliating, yet there seemed nothing to do except to await the Cortlandts' return, and, if he failed to reach them by telephone, to spend the night in the open. It occurred to him that he might try to locate Stein or some other of his late fellow− passengers, but they were probably scattered across the Isthmus by this time.

A band was playing in the plaza when he came back—a very good band, too—and, finding a bench, he allowed his mind the relief of idly listening to the music. The square was filling with Spanish people, who soon caught and held his attention, recalling Mrs. Cortlandt's words regarding the intermixture of bloods in this country; for every imaginable variety of mongrel breed looked out from the loitering crowd. But no matter what the racial blend, black was the fundamental tone. Undeniably the Castilian strain was running out; not one passer−by in ten seemed really white. Naturally, there was no color line. Well−dressed girls, evidently white, or nearly so, went arm and arm with wenches as black as night; men of every shade fraternized freely.

It was a picturesque and ever−changing scene. Kirk saw dark−faced girls wearing their unfailing badge of maidenhood—a white mantilla—followed invariably at a distance by respectful admirers who never presumed to walk beside them; wives whom marriage had forced to exchange the white shawl for the black, escorted by their husbands; huge, slouching Jamaican negroes of both sexes; silent−footed, stately Barbadians who gave a touch of savagery to the procession. Some of the women wore giant firebugs, whose glowing eyes lent a ghostly radiance to hair or lace, at once weird and beautiful. Round and round the people walked to the strains of their national music, among them dozens upon dozens of the ever−present little black−and−tan policemen, who constitute the republic's standing army.

As the evening drew on, Kirk became conscious of an unwonted sensation. Once before he had had the same feeling—while on a moose−trail in Maine. But now there was no guide, with a packful of food, to come to his relief, and he could not muster up the spirit that enables men to bear vacation hardships with cheerfulness.

He began to wonder whether a fast of twenty−four hours would seriously weaken a man, and, rather than make the experiment, he again called up the Tivoli, rejoicing anew in the fact that there was no toll on Isthmian messages. But again he was disappointed. This time he was told that the Cortlandts were doubtless spending the night out of town with friends.

Soon after his second return to the park, the concert ended, the crowd melted away, and he found himself occupying a bench with a negro of about the same age as himself. For perhaps an hour the two sat there hearkening to the dying noises of the city; then Kirk, unable to endure the monotony longer, turned sharply on his companion and said:

"Why don't you go home?"

The negro started, his eyes flew open, then he laughed: "Oh, boss, I got no home."

"Really?"

"No, sar."

Kirk reflected that he had found not only the right place, but also fitting company, for his vigil.

"What does a person do in that case?" he asked.

"Oh, he goes to work, sar."

"For the night, I mean. Are you going to stay here until morning?"

"Yes, sar, if the policeman will h'admit of it."

The fellow's dialect was so strange that Kirk inquired: "Where did you come from?"

"Jamaica, sar. I was barn on the narth coast of the h'island, sar."

"Did you just arrive here?"

"Oh, Lard, no! I 'ave been a liver here for two year."

"A liver!" Kirk could not help smiling.

"Yes, sar! Sometimes I labor on the docks, again in the h'office. Lahst week lose I my position, and to−day my room h'also. Landladies is bad females, sar, very common."

"You've been shooting craps," said Kirk, accusingly.

"Crops, sar! What is crops?"

"You don't know what craps is! I mean you've been gambling."

"Oh, boss, I h'invest my money."

"Indeed!"

"Lahst Sunday nearly won I the big prize. I 'ad h'all but three numbers."

"Lottery ticket, eh?"

"H'eight! H'eight chawnces in all," the negro sighed. "But dreams is false, sar."

"So I've heard. Well, it seems we're in the same boat this beautiful evening. I have no place to sleep, either."

"You are humbugging me."

"No, I'm flat broke."

"Oh, chot me true, mon."

"I am chatting you true. I'm an outcast of fortune like yourself."

"Such talk! You make I laugh this house."

"What?"

"You make I laugh," repeated the other in a broad Devonshire dialect. "Praise God, you h'appear like a gentleman."

"I trust this little experience will not permanently affect my social standing. By−the−way, what is your name?"

"H'Allan."

"Hallan?"

"No, sar. H'Allan."

"Is that your first or last name?"

"Both, sar—h'Allan h'Allan."

"Mr. Allan Allan, you're unusually dark for a Scotchman," said Kirk, gravely. "Now, speaking as one gentleman to another, do you happen to know where we can get a hand−out?"

"'And−out?" inquired the puzzled negro.

"Yes; a lunch. Can't you lead me to a banana vine or a breadfruit bakery? I'm starving. They grow the finest cocoanuts in the world right here—worth five cents apiece; they require no care, have no worms, no bugs. You sit still and they drop in your lap. Can't you show me a tree where we can sit and wait for something to drop?"

Allan replied, seriously: "But when the cocoanut falls, it is no good for h'eating, sar. The milk is h'acid."

"I see you have a sense of humor; you should be in the consular service. But h'acid or sweet, h'eating or cooling, I must get something into my stomach—it's as flat as a wet envelope,"

The Jamaican rose, saying: "Step this way, please. I know the place where a very good female is, Per'aps she will make us a present."

"How far is it?"

"Oh, not too far," Allan replied, optimistically, and Kirk hopefully followed him.

But at the opposite side of the square they were halted by a sudden commotion which drove all thoughts of food out of their minds. From a building across the street issued a bugle−call, upon which an indescribable confusion broke forth. Men began running to and fro; a voice in authority shouted orders, each of which was the signal for another bugle−call. Through the wide−open doors the Panamanians could be seen, scurrying around a hose−cart, apparently in search of clothes; some were struggling into red shirts, others were stamping their feet into short boots or girding themselves with wide canvas belts. Meanwhile, the chief issued more orders and the bugle continued to blow.

"Oh, look, boss!" Allan cried, quickly. "There must be a 'flagration."

"It's a Spiggoty hose company, as I live. Come on!"

Already a glare could be seen above the crowded portion of the city, and the two set off in that direction at a run, leaving the bugle sounding in the rear and the gallant firemen still wrestling with their uniforms. They had nearly reached the fire when around a corner back of them, with frightful speed and clangor, came a modern automobile fire−truck, clinging to which was a swarm of little brown men in red shirts and helmets. They reminded the American of monkeys on a circus horse, and, although he had been counted a reckless driver, he exclaimed in astonishment at the daring way in which the chauffeur took the turn.

It was truly amazing, for the machine, which was the latest improvement in imported fire−fighting machinery, skidded the full width of the street, threatening to rip its tires off and turn turtle, then leaped upon the curb before its driver could straighten it up, and in a magnificent sweep carried away the wooden supports of an overhanging balcony. The timbers parted like straws; there came a shrill uproar from inside the building as the sleeping occupants poured forth, but without a pause the Yankee machine whizzed on up the street, its gong clanging, its occupants holding on for dear life, the peaceful inhabitants of Colon fleeing from its path like quail before the hoofs of a runaway horse.

"Hit her up!" Kirk yelled, delightedly, then leaned against a lamp−post and laughed until he was weak. In the midst of his merriment appeared the company he had just seen making up. They had found their uniforms at last, it seemed, down to the final belt and shoelace, and now came charging gallantly along in the tracks of the more speedy motor. They were drawing their hand− reel, each brave lad tugging lustily and panting with fatigue.

Kirk and his guide fell in behind and jogged to the scene of the conflagration.

A three−storied building was already half gutted; out of its windows roared long, fiery tongues; the structure snapped and volleyed a chorus to the sullen monotone of destruction. The street was littered with the household belongings of the neighborhood, and from the galleries and windows near by came such a flight of miscellaneous articles as to menace the safety of those below. Men shouted, women screamed, children shrieked, figures appeared upon the fire−lit balconies hurling forth armfuls of cooking utensils, bedding, lamps, food, and furniture, utterly careless of where they fell or of the damage they suffered. Kirk saw one man fling a graphophone from a top window, then lower a mattress with a rope. On all sides was a bedlam which the arrival of the firemen only augmented. The fire captains shouted orders to the buglers, the buglers blew feebly upon their horns, the companies deployed in obedience to the bugles, then everybody waited for further directions.

Again the trumpet sounded, whereupon each fireman began to interfere with his neighbor; a series of quarrels arose as couplings were made or broken; then, after an interminable delay, water began to flow, as if by a miracle.

But except in rare instances it failed to reach the flames. A ladder−truck, drawn by another excited company, now rumbled upon the scene, its arrival adding to the general disorder. Meanwhile, the steady tradewind fanned the blaze to ever−growing proportions.

"Why the devil don't they get closer?" Kirk inquired of his Jamaican companion.

Allan's eyes were wide and ringed with white; his teeth gleamed in a grin of ecstasy as he replied:

"Oh, Lard, my God, it is too 'ot, sar; greatly too 'ot! It would take a stout 'eart to do such a thing."

"Nonsense! They'll never put it out this way. Hey!" Kirk attracted the attention of a near−by nozzleman. "Walk up to it. It won't bite you." But the valiant fire−fighter held stubbornly to his post, while the stream he directed continued to describe a graceful curve and spatter upon the sidewalk in front of the burning building. "You're spoiling that old woman's bed," Anthony warned him, at which a policeman with drawn club forced him back as if resentful of criticism. Other peace officers compelled the crowd to give way, then fell upon the distracted property holders and beat them off their piles of furniture.

For perhaps ten minutes there was no further change in the situation; then a great shout arose as it was seen that the roof of the adjoining building had burst into flame. At this the fanfare of trumpets sounded again; firemen rushed down the street, dragging a line of hose and drenching the onlookers. But, despite their hurry, they halted too soon, and their stream just failed to reach the blazing roof. By now the heat had grown really intense, and the more hardy heroes in the vanguard retreated to less trying positions. The voice of the crowd had arisen to a roar rivalling that of the flames.

"They must intend to let the whole town burn!" cried Anthony.

"Yes, sar! Very probably, sar."

Kirk pointed to the nearest fireman. "If he'd get up under that wall he could save the roof and be out of the heat." He undertook to convey this suggestion to the fellow, but without result. "I can't stand this," he exclaimed at last. "Let's give him a hand, Allan."

"Very well, sar."

"Here! help me get a kink in this hose. There! Now you hold it until you feel me pull." Kirk forced his way out through the crowd, to find the fireman holding the nozzle, from which a feeble stream was dribbling, and mechanically directing it at the fire. Kirk laid hold of the canvas and, with a heave, dragged it, along with its rightful guardian, ten feet forward; but there had been no bugle−blown order for this, and the uniformed man pulled backward with all his might, chattering at Kirk in Spanish.

"Well, then let go." Anthony shook the Panamannikin loose, then ran forward across the street until he brought up at the end of the slack and felt the hose behind him writhe and swell as Allan released his hold. The next instant the negro was at his side, and the two found themselves half blistered by the heat that rolled out upon them. But the newly ignited roof was within range, and the stream they played upon it made the shingles fly.

"Oh, Lard!" Allan was crying. "Oh, Lard! I shall h'expire."

"Pull down your hat and shield your face."

The fireman they had despoiled began to drag at the hose from a safe distance; but when Kirk made as if to turn the nozzle upon him he scampered away amid the jeers of the crowd. A few moments later, the American felt a hand upon his arm and saw an angry policeman who was evidently ordering him back. Behind him stood the excited nozzleman with two companions.

"He says you should return the 'ose where you found it," Allan translated.

"Leave us alone," Kirk replied. "You fellows help the others; we'll attend to this." More rapid words and gesticulations followed, in the midst of which a dapper young man in a uniform somewhat more impressive than the others dashed up, flung himself upon Anthony and endeavored to wrench the hose from his hands. Meanwhile he uttered epithets in broken English which the other had no difficulty in understanding. Kirk promptly turned the nozzle upon him, and the full force of Colon's water−pressure struck him squarely in the stomach, doubling him up like the kick of a mule. Down the newcomer went, then half rolled, half slid across the street as the stream continued to play upon him. He scrambled to his feet, a sorry spectacle of waving arms and dripping garments, his cries of rage drowned in the delighted clamor of the beholders.

"I guess they'll keep away now," laughed Kirk, as he turned back to his self−appointed task.

But Allan exclaimed, fearfully: "Oh, boss, I fear he is some 'igh h'officer."

"Never mind. We're having a lot of fun. It's medals for us—gold medals for bravery, Allan. To−morrow the

board of aldermen will thank us."

But this prediction seemed ill−founded. An instant later a half− dozen policemen advanced in a businesslike manner, and their leader announced: "Come! You are arrest."

"Pinched! What for? We're doing a lot of good here."

"Come, queeck!"

"Oh, Lard, my God!" Allan mumbled. "I shall die and kill myself."

"They won't do anything to us," Kirk assured him. "I've been pinched lots of times. We'll have to quit, though, and that's a pity. It was just getting good."

He surrendered the hose to a fireman, who promptly retreated with it to a discreet position, then followed his captors, who were now buzzing like bees.

"Don't get excited," he said to Allan, noting his frightened look. "They'll turn us loose all right."

But a moment after they were clear of the town he was surprised to see that the negro's captors had snapped "come−alongs" upon him in spite of his repeated promises to go quietly.

These handcuffs, Kirk saw, were of the type used upon desperate criminals, consisting of chains fitted with handles so contrived that a mere twist of the officer's hand would cut the prisoner's flesh to the bone.

"You don't need to do that," he assured the fellow who had made the arrest, but, instead of heeding his words, the men on each side of the Jamaican twisted stoutly, forcing the black boy to cry out in pain. He hung back, protesting:

"All right, sar, I'll come. I'll come."

But again they tightened their instruments of torture, and their victim began to struggle. At this an evil−faced man in blue struck him brutally upon the head with his club, then upon the shoulders, as if to silence his groans. The boy flung up his manacled hands to shield himself, and the light from a street lamp showed blood flowing where the chains had cut. The whole proceeding wat so unprovoked, so sickening in its cruelty, that Kirk, who until this instant had looked upon the affair as a rather enjoyable lark, flew into a fury and, disregarding his own captors, leaped forward before the policeman could strike a third time. He swung his fist, and the man with the club hurtled across the street as if shot from a bow, then lay still in the gutter. With another blow he felled one of the handcuff−men, but at the same time other hands grasped at him and he was forced to lay about vigorously on all sides.

They rushed him with the ferocity of mad dogs, and he knocked them spinning, one after another. A whistle blew shrilly, other uniforms came running, more whistles piped, and almost before he realized it he found himself in the centre of a pack of lean−faced brown men who were struggling to pull him down and striking at him with their clubs. With a sudden wild thrill he realized that this was no ordinary street fight; this was deadly; he must beat off these fellows or be killed. But, as fast as he cleared them away, others appeared as if by magic, until a dozen or more were swarming upon him like hungry ants. They clung to his arms, his legs, his clothing, with a desperate courage wholly admirable in itself, while strokes were aimed at him from every quarter. Time and again they dragged him off his feet, only to have him shake them loose. But though most of their blows went wild or found a mark among their own numbers, he was felled at last, and a moment later, with head reeling and wits flickering, he was dragged to his knees by handcuffs like those on Allan's wrists. The pain as the chains bit into his flesh brought him to his feet despite the blows and kicks that were rained upon him, crying hoarsely:

"Let me go, damn you! Let me go!"

But a wrench at the gyves took the fight out of him, for he felt that the bones in his wrists must surely be crushed. One side of his head was strangely big and numb; a warm stream trickled down his cheek; but he had no time to think of his condition, for his assailants fell upon him with fresh fury, and he reeled about, striving to shield himself. Every movement, however, was construed as resistance, and his punishment continued, until at last he must have fainted from pain or had his wits scattered by a blow on the head; for when he recovered consciousness he found himself in a filthy, ill−lighted room, flung upon a wooden platform that ran along the wall, evidently serving as a bed. Near him Allan was huddled, his black face distorted with pain and ashen with apprehension.

VIII. EL COMANDANTE TAKES A HAND

"Where are we?" queried Anthony, as he took in the surroundings.

"This is the prison, sar."

"Gee! I'm sick." Kirk lay back upon the platform and closed his eyes. "Did they hurt you much?"

"Oh yes. Very considerably."

"Sorry I got you into it, Allan, I never thought they'd be so cranky." Again he groaned. "I want a drink."

"Let me get it. Those Spiggoties will not give it to you."

Allan went to the door and called to the guard. An instant later he returned with a tin cup.

"I guess they knocked me out," Kirk said, dazedly. "I never was hit like that before—and jailed! Say! We must get out of her. Call the chief or the man in charge, will you? I can't speak the language."

"Please, sar, if you h'anger them they will beat us again."

"Beat! Not here?"

"Oh yes. They might kill us."

"They wouldn't do that!"

"A white man they killed lahst h'autumn, and several of my people have passed away in this prison. Nobody can 'ear nothing. Nobody knows what 'appens 'ere."

"Oh, well, they wouldn't dare touch us—I'm an American citizen. I'll notify the consul."

Roused at the mere suggestion. Kirk staggered to the door and shouted lustily. When no one answered, he shook the iron grating, whereupon a guard leisurely approached, and, after listening stolidly to his request, went back to his post at the other end of the hall. This time the American sent forth such an uproar that a man evidently corresponding in authority to a sergeant appeared with the command to be quiet.

"Let me out of here!" loudly demanded the prisoner. "I want the chief, or the alcalde, or somebody in charge. I want to know what I'm booked for, I want to telephone—TELEPHONE, don't you understand?—and arrange bail. Quick, now!"

But the officer merely frowned at him, obviously threatening a resort to force if this outburst did not cease at once.

"I tell you I want to get out," insisted Kirk. "I want to know what I'm charged with and have my friends get bail."

The man nodded his understanding and went away, but an hour passed and he did not return. Then another hour followed, and Anthony, who had now begun to feel the effect of his drubbing more keenly, renewed his clamor, with the result that a half−dozen policemen appeared, causing Allan to retreat to a corner and mumble prayers. From their demeanor it looked as though they were really bent upon mischief, but Kirk soon saw that an official had come in answer to his call. He felt less reassured when he perceived that the person in uniform who now stepped forward was the same upon whom he had turned the hose earlier in the evening.

This was a black−haired, black−eyed young fellow of, perhaps, thirty. While his skin was swarthy, even in this poor light it could be seen that he was of the real Castilian type and of a much better class than the others. He was slender and straight, his mouth small and decorated by a carefully pencilled little mustache, which was groomed to a needle sharpness. His hands and feet were as dainty as those of a woman. He was undeniably striking in appearance, and might have passed for handsome had it not been for the scowl that distorted his features.

"Eh! 'ere you are," he began, angrily.

"Yes; I want to get out, too. What does this treatment mean?"

The new−comer stepped toward the other occupant of the cell, at which Allan broke out in terror: "Don't you touch me. I'm a British object."

But it was evidently not the man's intention to offer any further indignity to his prisoners at that time. After scanning the Jamaican carefully, he issued an order to one of his men, who left the room.

"And I'm an American," Anthony declared. "You'll have to answer for this."

"Per'aps you don' know who I am. I am Ramon Alfarez, Comandante of Police, an' you dare' to t'row the water

of the 'ose−wagon upon my person. Your gover'ment will settle for those insolt." His white teeth showed in a furious snarl.

"I don't give a damn who you are. I'll get bail or do whatever your law requires, but I want to get out and I want to get out now."

The commandant's eyes flashed as he asked, shortly. "W'at is your name?"

"Anthony. Your men tried to kill that boy, and when I wouldn't stand for it they beat me up."

"You strock me wit' the water of the 'ose−carriage," repeated the other. "You 'ave assault the dignity of my country."

"I didn't know who you were. I was helping to stop that fire when you butted in. Now, are you going to let me out, or do you want my people to pull this jail down around your ears?"

At this threat Senor Alfarez restrained his rage with an obvious effort. "You will reply to those outrage, senor."

"Sure, I'll reply. But in the mean time I want to telephone to the American consul. Look at this!" The young man held out his shaking, swollen wrists, upon which the blood was scarcely dry. "Look at it! Those runts of yours got handcuffs on me and then beat me up. I'm sick. So's that boy. We need a doctor."

Alfarez shook his head. "You resis' the police. Even in your country one mus' not do that. 'Ave I been there, I would keel you both, but I am 'aving a cheel at the moment from those stream of col' water."

"Will you take me to a telephone?"

"It is not permit."

"Will you notify Mr. Weeks?"

Receiving no reply to this request, Kirk broke out: "Well, then, what ARE you going to do? Let us stay here all night?"

"W'at is your bizness?"

"I haven't any."

"You don' work on the Canal?"

"No. I'm a tourist. My father is a big railroad man in the States. I'm telling you this so you'll know how to act."

"W'ere do you leeve—w'at 'otel?"

"I've been stopping with Mr. Weeks."

Senor Alfarez's attitude became somewhat less overbearing.

"In due time he will be notify of your outrage to my person," he announced.

The fellow who had left the room a moment before now reappeared, carrying a bucket of water and some towels, with which he directed Allan to remove the blood from his face and hands. When it came Kirk's turn, however, he objected.

"I think I'll wait until Weeks sees me," he said.

But Alfarez retorted, sharply: "It is not permit"; and, seeing that resistance would be useless, Kirk acquiesced as gracefully as he could, remarking as he did so:

"You'll have hard work washing off this, and this." He indicated the traces of the handcuffs and the gash in his scalp.

The commandant turned to his men and addressed them at some length, calling them to task, as Allan later informed his companion, for using their clubs in a manner to mark their prisoners so conspicuously. Then he followed them into the corridor, closing the grating behind him.

The hours passed, and daylight came with no word from the American consul. By this time the two prisoners were really in need of medical attention. Their contusions pained them severely. Kirk felt as if one or more of his ribs were broken, and his suffering, combined with hunger, prevented sleep. He became feverish and fretful, but his demands for communication with the outside world were calmly ignored, although he felt certain that his wishes were fully understood. When the morning had passed without his being arraigned for a hearing he grew alarmed. Evidently he had been flung into confinement and forgotten.

Eventually Kirk and Allan were given food, but still no one came to their relief. Apparently no message had been delivered. This treatment was so atrocious, so at variance with Anthony's ideas of his own importance, that he felt he must be suffering from nightmare. How dared they treat an American so, no matter what the charge? Why didn't they try him or give him a hearing? These insolent, overbearing Panamaniacs had no regard for law or

humanity, and this was no longer a question of petty injustice; it was a grave infraction of civilized equity.

But the afternoon wore on without an encouraging sign, till Kirk began to think that Weeks had refused to intercede for him and intended to leave him to the mercies of his enemies. With difficulty he managed to convey to a guard his desire to notify some of the other Americans in the city, but as usual no heed was paid to his request.

It was considerably after dark when a visitor was at last admitted. He proved to be the English consul, whom Anthony had never met.

"What are you doing here?" the new−comer inquired. Then, when the facts had been laid before him, he exclaimed: "Why, I heard that a Jamaican negro had been arrested, but I heard nothing about mistreatment of a white man."

"Doesn't anybody know I'm here?"

"I'm sure no one does. Those heathens lied to you—they never communicated with Weeks or anybody. They're afraid. This is an old trick of theirs—man−handling a prisoner, then keeping him hidden until he recovers. If he doesn't recover they get out of it on some excuse or other, as best they can. Why, they killed a white sailor not long ago—just plain clubbed him to death without excuse, then asserted that he resisted arrest. They did the same to one of our negroes. He died in the jail before I got wind of it, and when I started an investigation they showed his signed statement declaring that he had not been abused at all, and had been given the kindest treatment. The matter isn't settled yet. It's infamous! Why, I had hard work to get in at all just now. But I'll have Allan here out in two hours or I'll know the reason. England protects her subjects, Mr. Anthony, and these people know it. If they don't come to time I'll have a gunboat in the harbor in twenty−four hours. Color doesn't amount to a damn with us, sir; it's the flag."

"I guess Uncle Sam is strong enough to command respect," said Anthony.

"Well, I know the circumstances now, and I'll go straight to Weeks. He can arrange your release without trouble. If you were an Englishman, I'd have you out in no time, and you'd collect handsome damages, too. This boy will."

True to the consul's prediction, a little later the Jamaican was led out of the cell, and from the fact that he was not brought back Kirk judged that the British intervention had been effectual. But it was not until the next morning, the second of his imprisonment, that the cell door opened once more, this time to admit the portly figure of John Weeks and the spruce person of Senor Ramon Alfarez.

"What's all this trouble about?" inquired the former in none too amiable a tone.

Kirk told his story as briefly and convincingly as he could. But when he had finished, the consul shook his head.

"I don't see what I can do for you," he said. "According to your own declaration you resisted a police officer. You'll have to take your medicine."

Alfarez nodded agreement. "Quite right!" said he. "He did terrible 'avoc with my men, t'ree of which is now on the 'ospital."

"But why don't they try me or let me get bail? I want to get out."

"You'll be tried as soon as they get around to it."

"Look here!" Kirk showed the marks his assailants had left upon him. "Will you stand for that? I've been here two nights now without medical attention." "How about that, Alfarez?"

The commandant shrugged his shoulders. "If he require a doctor, one shall be secure', but he is not severely injure.' I 'ave explain the frightful indignity to the honor of my person, yes? As for me, pooh! It is forget." He waved his hand gracefully and smiled sweetly upon his fat visitor. "It does not exist. But the brave soldiers of mine! Ah! Senor Wick, they lofe me, they cannot forget the honor of el comandante. So! When the prisoner is decide to insurrect, who can say those gallant soldier don' be too strong? Who can blame for making roff−'ouse?"

"I guess you ain't hurt much," said Weeks, eying his countryman coldly. "You didn't get any more than was coming to you."

"I won't stand for this," cried the prisoner, hotly. "The English consul got that nigger boy out, and I want you to do the same for me."

"You don't understand. I've got business interests in this country, and I can't dash about creating international issues every time an American gets locked up for disorderly conduct. How long do you think I'd last with these

people if I did that?"

"Are you really afraid to do anything?" Kirk inquired, slowly. "Or is it because of our row?"

"Oh, there's nothing personal about it! I can't afford personal feelings in my position. Really, I don't see where you're so much abused. You assaulted a government officer and resisted arrest. If you got hurt it's your own fault. Of course I'll see that you have a fair trial."

The commandant spoke up with ingratiating politeness: "The prisoner say he is reech man's son. Now, of course, it is too bad he is injure' wit' the clob of the policeman; but those officer is ver' polite, senor, and if he is explain biffore—"

Weeks snorted indignantly. "He gave you that fairy tale, eh? He said his name was Anthony and his father was a railroad president, didn't he? Well, he imposed on me, too, but his name is Locke, and, as near as I can learn, he practically stowed away on the SANTA CRUZ."

"Ah−h!" The officer's eyes widened as he turned them upon his prisoner. "He is then a w'at you call tramp."

"All I know is, he stuck me for a lot of bills. I'll have to see that he gets fair treatment, I suppose, because he's an American, but that ends my duty."

"Is this the best you'll do for me?" Kirk inquired, as Weeks made ready to go.

"Yes."

"Will you tell some of the men at the Wayfarers that I'm here?"

"Oh, that won't do any good. You're in for it, Locke, so don't holler. I'll be on hand at your hearing."

"Will you cable my father?"

"At twenty−five cents a word? Hardly!" The speaker mopped his face, exclaiming: "There's no use of talking, I've got to get out in the air; it's too hot in here for me." Then he waddled out ahead of Senor Alfarez, who slammed the door behind him as he followed to escort his caller to the street.

But a half−hour later the commandant returned to the cell, and this time he brought with him a number of his little policemen, each armed with a club. Feeling some menace in their coming, Kirk, who had seated himself dejectedly, arose to ask: "What's coming off?"

Alfarez merely issued some directions in Spanish, and chain handcuffs were once more snapped upon the prisoner's wrists.

"So! you're going to hold my trial, eh?" cried Kirk.

But the other snarled: "Senor Locke, you 'ave force' the water of the 'ose−wagon upon my body for making the people laugh. Bueno! Now I shall laugh." He seated himself, then nodded at his men to begin.

IX. SPANISH LAW

Mrs. Cortlandt answered her telephone for the second time, repeating with some impatience: "Tell the man I can't see him."

"But he refuses to leave—says he must see you at once; it's important," came the voice of the clerk.

"Oh, very well. I'll come down." She hung up the receiver with a snap.

"Why don't they send him up?" queried her husband from the sitting−room.

"It's a negro, and the clerk says he'd rather not allow him up− stairs. Another sick family, I suppose."

"They're beginning to impose on you. It's usually that way with charities," said Cortlandt.

With unfeminine neglect of the chance for petty discussion, his wife left the room without replying, and descended to the hotel lobby. Here she was directed toward a very ragged, very woe−begone young black on the rear porch, who, at sight of her, began to fumble his hat and run his words together so excitedly that she was forced to calm him.

"Now, now! I can't understand a word. Who are you?"

"H'Allan, mistress."

"You say some one is ill?"

"Oh yes, he is very h'ill h'indeed, mistress—h'all covered with blood and his poor 'ands h'all cut."

"Who—?"

"And his 'ead—oh, Lard! His 'ead is cut, too, and he suffers a fever."

"WHO IS IT?"

"Mr. h'Auntony—"

"Anthony!" Mrs. Cortlandt started. "What has happened? Quick!"

Seeing that at last he had found a friend, the Jamaican began to sob with relief, wailing extravagant praises to God and apparently endeavoring to kiss Mrs. Cortlandt's hand, whereat she seized him by the shoulders and shook him, crying:

"Stop that! Behave yourself and tell me what is the trouble, quickly now, from the beginning."

Without drying his tears, Allan launched himself into the full violence of his recital, stumbling recklessly over his figures of speech, lapsing into idioms that it taxed his hearer to follow. Had she been less acquainted with the Caribbean dialects she would have missed much of the story, but, as it was, she followed him closely, urging him on with sharp expressions of amazement and nods of understanding. Rapidly she gathered the facts of the case, while her cheeks whitened and her eyes grew dark with indignation. The sight renewed Allan's emotion. His voice broke, his black hands shook, he began to sob once more, and great tears stole down his ebony cheeks. But he managed to answer her terse, shocked questions with some degree of intelligence, calling upon his vivid imagination for such details as his memory had lost.

"I wait an' wait for him to h'emerge, but he does not come. Perhaps they 'ave killed the poor mon once more."

"How did you get here?"

"With my feet, mistress. Sometimes rode I on the train, but the train people are very common; they h'addressed me rudely and threw me by the wayside."

"Couldn't you telephone?"

"I do not h'understand 'ow."

"Why didn't he notify me at once? If I had only known—"

"Those 'eartless Spiggoties would not h'allow it. Oh, you will h'assist the poor mon! Say it. Praise be to God, he is bleeding in the prison—"

"Yes, yes, certainly."

Allan reached clumsily this time to kiss the hem of her skirt, but she stepped aside quickly, fumbling meanwhile in her purse for a bank−note, while he exclaimed:

"God bless you, good mistress. He told me to find you and present his recital."

"Here, take this money and go back to Colon by the first train. We may need you. Now go! I'll be there ahead of you."

She picked up her white skirts and ran up the hotel stairs as if pursued, bursting in upon her husband so impetuously that he rose in surprise, inquiring:

"What is it?"

"Young Anthony is in jail in Colon," she panted. "He's been locked up for three days, and they won't let him out."

"The devil! You said he'd gone back to New York. What is it about?"

"I thought he had. They arrested him for some silly thing, and he's hurt." She hurriedly recounted Allan's story, adding, in conclusion, "That black boy came all the way across the Isthmus to tell us!"

"I'll get the American consul by 'phone—"

But Mrs. Cortlandt interrupted. "Weeks is a fool! He wouldn't do anything. Wait!" She stepped to the instrument and rang violently. "Give me Colonel Jolson's office, quickly. If he is not there, find him. I don't care where he is, find him; it is important. This is Mrs. Cortlandt speaking.'

"What do you mean to do?" said Cortlandt.

"Go to Colon at once. This is young Alfarez's doing—the whipper− snapper—you must lay him out for this. How dare he!"

"Better go carefully. Remember, General Alfarez is his father."

"I understand. But we are bound to come to a breach sooner or later."

"I hardly think so. I believe we can bring him around all right— anyhow, I haven't lost hope." Then, as his wife made an impatient gesture: "Well, if we precipitate a quarrel now, that will end it." He paced the room feverishly. "Good heavens, Edith! Anthony chose the worst possible time for this escapade. I suppose it will mean diplomatic difficulties and all that, and once we lose old Alfarez—"

"We will lose him anyhow," snapped the woman. "I've seen it coming, although you could not. I'll break Ramon for this."

"Then you'll break us." Cortlandt stared gloomily at his wife, who met his gaze squarely. "Do you think Anthony is worth it?"

"My dear Stephen, they nearly killed that poor boy, and I sha'n't allow it. Don Anibal Alfarez is not the only presidential timber in the republic. If he breaks with us it will cost him dearly. You think he is friendly, but I know that deep down in his crafty old heart he despises all us Americans and is only waiting a chance to gratify his spleen. The moment he dares, he'll turn against us."

Cortlandt's frosty countenance showed signs of unusual agitation as he answered: "You're mad! You threaten to ruin everything. You understand perfectly—there's no use of my explaining. Let me call on him this afternoon. He will instruct his son."

"No! He would procrastinate, as usual. There would be the customary delays and excuses, and meanwhile Anthony would be in jail at Colon. They would have a defence all prepared. Besides, if it's to be a fight we must have all the weapons possible—and this affair may prove a good one. Anyhow, you mustn't ask a favor of him at this time; he must ask, not you."

The telephone rang, and the speaker snatched the receiver from its hook.

"Hello! Colonel Jolson, I'm very glad I caught you. This is Mrs. Cortlandt. Colonel Jolson, young Ramon Alfarez has arrested Kirk Anthony, of whom I spoke to you. They have maltreated him, as usual, and have hidden him for three days. Yes, yes! I discovered it quite by accident while Mr. Cortlandt was down−town. Oh, this is serious, and I'm furious. ... That will do no good; I have reasons for preferring to handle it myself. ... Thank you for the compliment. We must go to Colon at once, and I thought you might give us a special." There was a slight pause, then: "Good! That will do quite as well. In fifteen minutes. Thank you. Good−bye."

Turning to her husband, she explained, swiftly: "The Colonel's automobile will be waiting at the station in fifteen minutes. Are you ready?"

"I think you are going about this in the wrong way," he said, coldly. "When will you learn—?" She checked her crisp words at the flush that leaped to his cheeks. "I beg your pardon, Stephen. Please do as Colonel Jolson has done and trust me to manage this affair."

He bowed and left her, saying, "I will have a coach waiting at the door."

Fifteen minutes later a gasoline railroad motor−car with two passengers in addition to its driver and flagman rolled out of the yards at Panama City and took the main line, running under orders like a special train. As it

clanked over the switches with ever− increasing speed, Mrs. Cortlandt leaned forward and spoke to the driver.

"We will have a clear track, and you may go as fast as you like."

The next moment the machine was reeling drunkenly around curves and a fifty−mile gale was roaring past.

Senor Ramen Alfarez was considerably nonplussed when his two distinguished visitors made known the nature of their errand. Cortlandt did most of the talking, his cold hauteur serving a good purpose and contrasting strongly with the suppressed excitement of his wife.

"Pardon me, there is no necessity for delay," he said, as the commandant endeavored to formulate an excuse. "I trust I need not insist upon seeing the prisoner?" He raised his brows with a stare of inquiry that caused the other to reply, hastily:

"Of a certainty not, senor."

"Then take us to him."

"I will spare your lady the painful sight of the prison−house. The prisoner shall be fetch' with all despatch."

"We will see him alone."

Again the commandant hesitated, while his bright eyes searched their faces with a sudden uneasy curiosity. "I am fear soch t'ing is not permit'."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Cortlandt, unable longer to restrain herself. "We know the law quite as well or perhaps better than you, Senor Alfarez. If you wish, Mr. Cortlandt will get permission from the President. You have a telephone?"

"Oh, soch is farthes' remove' from my thoughts," quickly interposed the commandant, with his most graceful bow. "If it is in my power to oblige, w'at matter the law? Pouf! W'at I mean is this: Our prisoner is not what you call seeck, nor is he ver' well. He is resis' the officer by force an' he is injure'—oh, but only a leetle—it is not'ing. One is truly foolish for resis' the policemans, yes?" He shook his dark head sadly. "I am desolate to 'ear of soch t'ing; it is so useless to stroggle wit' the officer in disbursement of duty; but you Americans are so brave! I am force' to admire this prisoner; he is soch a strong fellow."

"I think we understand the circumstances."

Instead of ringing for an orderly the commandant excused himself, then, after a seemingly interminable delay returned with Anthony and several policemen.

At sight of his friends the young man made for them eagerly, crying: "Jove, I'm glad you came! I'd about given you up."

"Allan only found us to−day," Mrs. Cortlandt replied.

"Did he tell the truth? Have you been abused?"

The young man turned a pair of smouldering eyes upon his enemies. He looked ill and haggard, although, except for the wound half concealed beneath his hair, he showed no marks. Then he held out his hands with a grim smile, and the woman uttered a low cry at what she saw. "They gave me another good beating yesterday," he said.

"While you were in jail?" Cortlandt queried, incredulously. "God!"

"That's the fellow yonder." Kirk pointed to Alfarez, whose smile had disappeared.

"Oh, the man is mistake'," the latter hastened to aver. "He is crazee."

"I gave you a wetting in public, and—"

"Si, si! That is correc', Senor Cortlan'. He insolt my person an' fight my soldiers. He is ver' toff person."

"Did you know he had been maltreated in prison?" Cortlandt demanded.

"Oh, senor!" Alfarez raised his hands in horrified disclaimer of the very thought, but his victim said, quietly:

"He's a liar. He ordered it, then sat there and enjoyed it."

The Panamanian's face was yellow as he managed to enunciate:

"Eempossible! It is terrible to conceive!"

Kirk made a threatening movement in the Spaniard's direction, despite the half−dozen soldiers, but Edith Cortlandt checked him.

"Wait, please," she said. Then to the commandant: "This is a serious matter, and if what he says is true, your government will find itself in trouble."

"But we 'ave no idea he is frien' of yours. If he should only spik your 'osban's name, all would be different. For my part, I can prove he is treat' with the 'ighes' courtesy an' kindness in my presence. Every man in the prison will

testify to those fac'. If soch indignity 'ave be' shown, there shall be investigations." The unhappy officer's excitement was increasing, and he turned upon his men as if to make good his word, when Cortlandt interposed:

"Why did you keep him locked up so long? Why didn't you try him?"

"Ah! For that I shall inquire also. I shall conduct investigations in that respect as well. I am inform', 'owever, that the w'at you call jodge is seeck."

"We'll look into that later. We're here now to arrange for Mr. Anthony's release."

"The alcalde will be please' to accommodate at the earlies'. I myself shall see to it. To−morrow—"

"There will be no to−morrow about it," Mrs. Cortlandt exclaimed, positively. "If you cannot arrange the bail yourself, my husband will take up the matter with the Zone Government, and Colonel Jolson will call upon the President of the republic within an hour. He is waiting word from us now."

Senor Ramon Alfarez became suddenly galvanized. He broke into effusive apologies for even so small a delay as had already occurred. He had not understood the matter to be so urgent, it seemed; but the wishes of his distinguished guests were his law, and perhaps he might hasten the wheels of progress if he tried. While, to be sure, no power was vested in him, and his willing hands were most miserably tied, nevertheless he would so far exceed his authority as to promise instant freedom to the prisoner. There were, of course, certain details to be observed, the necessity of which filled him with unspeakable regret; but if he might be excused—He hastened forth to set in motion the proper machinery, and while he was absent Kirk told his story. It left the woman white−lipped and incoherent, and roused even the icy Cortlandt to genuine wrath.

"Of course," the latter said, "Alfarez will prove by his men that it's all imagination on your part, and that your injuries were sustained at the time of your arrest. He'll assume a righteous indignation and start a Spiggoty investigation. You see, his father is the Governor of Panama Province and one of the strongest men in the republic, so Ramon will probably make good his position. Even so, you may recover damages."

"I don't want damages," Kirk replied. "I want to get that Dago out alone some time."

"For Heaven's sake, don't think of it!" Mrs. Cortlandt exclaimed. "All the American influence on the Isthmus wouldn't help you then. Fifty men would perjure themselves to convict you, and if you succeeded in getting our government to interfere in time, Ramen has fifty other men who would lie to any extent to injure an American."

"No. That method doesn't work here," her husband agreed. "You're lucky to escape so easily. He will arrange bail, never fear, and you will probably not come to trial. I doubt if you will ever hear anything more of the matter, provided you keep from further trouble. He'll never forgive you, of course, but that won't matter to you."

The first part of Mr. Cortlandt's prediction was soon proved true, for the sick alcalde recovered sufficiently to appear on the scene within half an hour. Then, after much signing of official documents and certain other formalities, Kirk Anthony walked out of the Colon jail in company with his friends.

Allan was waiting at a safe distance from the municipal building, and on seeing his late companion at large he broke into the wildest rejoicing. He conjured a flow of tears, he fondled Kirk's hand in his own, he laughed, he sobbed, he sang.

"Praise be to God!" he cried, loudly. "Free mon you, Master h'Auntony. Glory, glory! My soul was in 'ell, sar. On my knees I h'implored that fa−ast wretch to release you."

His emotion appeared so genuine, his service had been so great, that the object of his adoration felt himself choke up. Of all the people Kirk had met since leaving home, this one had most occasion to blame him; yet the boy was in perfect transports of delight at his delivery.

"Don't carry on so," Kirk laughed, awkwardly.

"Oh, boss, I feared they would h'assassinate you again."

Anthony nodded grimly. "They did."

"Oh, oh!" Allan gave himself over to a shrill frenzy and shook his clenched fists at the jail in a splendidly tragic attitude. "Wretches! Murderers! 'Ell−ca−ats!"

"Sh−h! Don't make a scene on the street," Mrs. Cortlandt cautioned. But the Jamaican would not allow the fine effect of his rage to be lost. He clashed his white teeth, he rolled his eyes fearfully, and twisted his black features into the wildest expressions of ferocity, crying:

"H'Allan will best them for that! Let 'im tear h'out their'earts by his fingers. So!" He made an eloquent gesture. "Blood! Blood!"

"Not so loud. A little pianissimo on the blood," smiled Kirk.

"H'Allan would die and kill himself for you," the excited negro ran on in an excess of loyalty. "Master h'Auntony fought those wretches for I; I shall fight them for he."

When he had finally been prevailed upon to exchange his martial threats for a fresh paean of rejoicing, he fell in behind, declaring firmly that he intended to follow his new−found hero wherever he might go, though the course laid were straight for those infernal regions that played so large a part in his fancy.

In the midst of Kirk's expressions of gratitude for the timely intercession of Cortlandt and his wife, the former surprised him by saying, in a genuinely hearty tone:

"My wife has told me all about you, Anthony, and I want you to come over to Panama as my guest until you hear from your father."

When Kirk informed him of the cablegram that had cast him adrift in Panama, leading indirectly to his entanglement with the dignity of Ramon Alfarez and the Spanish law, Cortlandt replied, reassuringly:

"Oh, well, your father doesn't understand the facts in the case, that's all. You sit down like a sensible person and write him fully. It will be a great pleasure for us to have you at the Tivoli in the mean time."

Seeing a warm second to this invitation in Mrs. Cortlandt's eyes, Kirk accepted gracefully, explaining: "You know this is the first time I was ever up against hard luck, and I don't know just how to act."

"We've missed the four−thirty−five, so we will have to return the way we came," said Cortlandt. "I'd like to stop at Gatun on a business matter of some importance, and if you don't mind a half− hour's delay, we'll do so."

Kirk expressed entire acquiescence in any plans that suited the convenience of his rescuers, and the three pursued their way to the station. But here an unexpected embarrassment arose. As they made ready to board Colonel Jolson's motor−car, they were annoyed to find that Allan insisted on going, too. He insisted, moreover, in such extravagant fashion that Mrs. Cortlandt at last was moved to say: "For Heaven's sake, let the poor thing come along." And thereafter the Jamaican boy sat on the step of the machine, his hat in hand, his eyes rolled worshipfully upon the person of his hero, his shining face ever ready to break into a grin at a glance from Kirk.

Once more the little automobile took on the dignity of a regular train and sped out of the network of tracks behind Colon. As it gained speed Mrs. Cortlandt, to divert her guest's mind from his recent ordeal, began to explain the points of interest as they passed. She showed him the old French workings where a nation's hopes lay buried, the mechanical ruins that had cost a king's ransom, the Mount Hope Cemetery, whither daily trains had borne the sacrifice before science had robbed the fever of its terrors. She told him, also, something of the railroad's history, how it had been built to bridge the gap in the route to the Golden West, the manifold difficulties overcome in its construction, and the stupendous profits it had made. Having the blood of a railroad− builder in his veins, Anthony could not but feel the interest of all this, though it failed to take his attention wholly from the wonders of the landscape that slipped by on either side. It was his first glimpse of tropic vegetation, and he used his eyes to good advantage, while he listened politely to his informant.

The matted thickets, interlaced with vine and creeper, were all ablaze with blossoms, for this was the wet season, in which nature runs riot. Great trees of strange character rose out of the tangle, their branches looped with giant cables and burdened with flowering orchids or half hidden beneath other parasites. On every hand a vegetable warfare was in progress—a struggle for existence in which the strong overbore the weak—and every trunk was distorted by the scars of the battle. Birds of bright plumage flashed in the glades, giant five−foot lizards scuttled away into the marshes or stared down from the overhanging branches. A vivid odor of growing, blooming herbage reached the nostrils.

Just as Kirk had made up his mind that he could sit and watch this brilliant panorama forever, the jungle suddenly fell away, and the car sped up through low, grass−clad hills into a scattered city flung against the side of a wide valley. There was no sign here of Latin America; this was Yankeeland through and through. The houses, hundreds upon hundreds of them, were of the typical Canal Zone architecture, double−galleried and screened from foundation to eaves, and they rambled over the undulating pasture land in a magnificent disregard of distance. Smooth macadam roads wound back and forth, over which government wagons rolled, drawn by sleek army mules; flower gardens blazed forth in gorgeous colors; women and children, all clean and white and American, were sitting upon the porches or playing in the yards. Everywhere was a military neatness; the town was like the officers' quarters of a fort, the whole place spick and span and neatly groomed.

Colon had been surprisingly clean, but it was an unnatural cleanliness, as if the municipality had been scrubbed against its will. Gatun was to the manner born.

"Yonder are the locks." Cortlandt pointed to the west, and Kirk saw below him an impressive array of pyramidal steel towers, from the pinnacles of which stretched a spider's web of cables. Beneath this, he had a glimpse of some great activity, but his view was quickly cut off as the motor−car rumbled into a modem railway station.

"I'd like to have a. look at what's going on over yonder," he said.

"You will have time," Cortlandt answered. "Edith will show you about while I run in on Colonel Bland."

Out through the station−shed Kirk's hostess led him, then across a level sward, pausing at length upon the brink of a mighty chasm. It took him a moment to grasp the sheer magnitude of the thing; then he broke into his first real expression of wonder:

"Why, I had no idea—Really, this is tremendous."

At his feet the earth opened in a giant, man−made canon, running from the valley above, through the low ridge and out below. Within it an army was at work. Along the margins of the excavation ran steel tracks, upon which were mounted the movable towers he had seen from a distance. These tapering structures bore aloft long, tautly drawn wire cables, spanning the gorge and supporting great buckets which soared at regular intervals back and forth, bearing concrete for the work below. Up and out of the depths tremendous walls were growing like the massive ramparts of a mediaeval city; tremendous steel forms, braced and trussed and reinforced to withstand the weight of the countless tons, stood in regular patterns. In the floor of the chasm were mysterious pits, black tunnel mouths, in and out of which men crept like ants. Far across on the opposite lip of the hill, little electric trains sped to and fro, apparently without the aid of human hands. Everywhere was a steady, feverish activity.

From the commanding eminence where the sightseers stood the spectacle was awe−inspiring; for though the whole vast work lay spread out beneath them in what looked like a hopeless confusion, yet as their eyes followed it a great and magic system became manifest. The whole organism seemed animate with some slow, intricate intelligence. The metal skips careening across those dizzy heights regulated their courses to a hand's−breadth, deposited their burdens carefully, then hurried back for more; the shuttle trains that dodged about so feverishly, untended and unguided, performed each some vital function. The great conglomerate body was dead, yet it pulsated with a life of its own. Its effect of being governed by a single indwelling mind of superhuman capacity was overpowering.

Kirk heard Mrs. Cortlandt explaining: "The ships will steam up from the sea through the dredged channel you see over yonder, then they will be raised to the level of the lake."

"What lake?"

"That valley"—she indicated the tropical plain between the hills, wherein floating dredges were at work—"will be an inland sea. Those forests will be under water."

"Where is the Gatun dam I've heard so much about?"

She pointed out a low, broad ridge or hog−back linking the hills together.

"That is it. It doesn't look much like a dam, does it? But it is all hand−made. Those are rock trains out there, from Culebra."

"Oh, now I understand. Gee whiz, but this job is a whopper! Say, this is great!" Mrs. Cortlandt smiled. "It does wake up your patriotism, doesn't it? I'm glad to have a hand in building it."

"Are you helping to dig this canal?" Anthony regarded the woman curiously. She seemed very cool and well−dressed and independent for one engaged in actual work.

"Of course! Even though I don't happen to run a steam−shovel."

"Will they really finish it? Won't something happen?"

"It is already dug. The rest is merely a matter of excavation and concrete. The engineering difficulties have all been solved, and the big human machine has been built up. What is more important, the country is livable at last. Over at Ancon Hospital there is a quiet, hard−working medical man who has made this thing possible. When the two oceans are joined together, and the job is finished, his will be the name most highly honored."

"It must be nice to do something worth while," Anthony mused, vaguely.

"To do anything," his companion observed, with a shade of meaning; then: "It is amusing to look back on the old Spanish statement that it would be impious to unite two oceans which the Creator of the world had separated."

Noting that the sun was setting beyond the distant jungles and the canon at his feet was filling with shadows, Kirk remarked, "It must be nearly time they quit work."

"This work doesn't stop. When it grows dark the whole place is lit by electricity, and the concrete continues to pour in just the same. It is wonderful then—like the mouth of a volcano. Batteries of search−lights play upon the men; the whole sky is like a furnace. You can see it for miles. Now I think we had better go back to the car."

In spite of his bodily misery, that night ride impressed itself strongly upon Anthony's mind. The black mystery of the jungles, the half−suggested glimpses of river and hill, the towns that flashed past in an incandescent blaze and were buried again in the velvet blackness, the strange odors of a new land riotous in its time of growth, all combined to excite his curiosity and desire for closer knowledge. And then the crowning luxury of a bath, clean clothes, and a good meal on white linen and china! As he dropped asleep that night he reflected contentedly that, after all, things have a way of coming right in this world for those who accept them cheerfully as they come.

X. A CHANGE OF PLAN

On the following morning Kirk despatched a long letter to his father, explaining, as well as he could, how he came to be in Panama, and giving a detailed account of the events that had befallen him since his arrival. He would have preferred to cable this message collect, but Mrs. Cortlandt convinced him that he owed a fuller explanation than could well be sent over the wires. Although he took this means of relieving his father's anxiety, he was far from resigning himself to a further delay of his return. On the contrary, he at once began an inquiry as to sailing dates, discovering, to his intense disgust, that no ship was scheduled to leave for New York within several days. He planned to borrow the passage money from his friends, when the time came, and accompany his letter northward. Meanwhile he devoted his time to sight− seeing with his hostess.

The city was old, there were many places of historic interest, and, although Kirk cared little for such things, he found it easy to assume the virtue he did not possess. Moreover, there was something contagious in his companion's enthusiasm. Almost against his will he felt his appreciation growing, as he listened to her casual comments on the scenes they visited. Her husband, who seemed busily engaged in work that barely allowed him time for his meals, seldom accompanied them on their excursions, and the two were thrown much into each other's society.

Edith Cortlandt was a woman very sure of herself in most things. A situation that might have proved embarrassing to one less tactful she accepted quite as a matter of course, rather enjoying the exercise of her influence, and never doubting her power to keep the friendship on any footing she chose. Kirk's frank, boyish gratitude for the favors he had received made it easy for her to encourage the growth of an intimacy that she acknowledged charming, while she sincerely believed that he would be helped by it. Finding him responsive, she deliberately set herself to please him. She studied him covertly and set her moods to match his—not a difficult task, since he was merely a normal, healthy young man. Always faultless in her attire, she took even more than ordinary pains with her appearance, and it was not long before Kirk was naively surprised to find that she no longer seemed older than he —that she was, in fact, an exceedingly handsome woman. This gradual metamorphosis depended more than anything else, perhaps, upon the girlish humor that now possessed her. She was no longer brilliant and chilly, but gay, smiling, and unaffected.

Daytimes, they rambled about the crooked streets, bargain−hunting in the Chinese shops, or drove beneath the stately royal palms of Ancon; evenings, they loitered about the cool verandas of the Tivoli or strolled down into the town to watch the crowds in the plazas. Once in a while Cortlandt went with them, but he was usually uncommunicative, and they scarcely felt his presence. On the few occasions when he gave himself rein, Kirk was compelled to feel for him a surprised and half−grudging respect. Unlike most silent men, when he did talk he talked easily and well.

Several days passed thus, during which Anthony fully recovered from his experience at Colon. Then a ship arrived from New York, but before he had summoned courage to ask his friends for a loan he received, a letter forwarded from Colon by the American consul, a perusal of which not only dumfounded him, but entirely altered his plans.

It was typewritten, on plain stationery; there was neither heading nor signature, yet he knew quite well from whom it came. It read as follows:

> Don't cable again, or the stupidity of the police may fail to protect you. The others got away safely and you would be mad to return alone. I can't and won't help you now. This time you went too far. You have made your bed, now lie in it. I don't believe in miracles, but if you can straighten up and make a man of yourself, I'll help you face this trouble; otherwise don't call on me for anything. I'm through.

Kirk reread this amazing epistle several times before its full significance struck him; then, when he realized what it meant, he felt himself break into a sweat of apprehension. That plain− clothes man had died! The police were looking for him. There could be no other explanation, else why had Higgins and the rest fled the country?

Why had his father been so cautious in communicating with him? If it came to a trial, undoubtedly a jury would find him equally guilty with Higgins, for he had held the poor fellow's hands; it was he who had engineered the whole episode. Perhaps he was already indicted. Kirk saw himself accused of manslaughter, arrested, and tried. What could he do if his father refused to help? With money, almost anything could be achieved; without it, and particularly without his father's influence, what would happen? Evidently the Governor believed him guilty. In that case the young man knew that explanations would be futile. Even the letter he had sent would do no good. When Darwin K. Anthony said he was through, he was through.

Finding a secluded corner of the veranda, he sat down to think this matter out; but the more he reflected on it the more serious it appeared. Of one thing he became quickly convinced: New York at present was no place for him. A moment ago it seemed far away and extremely desirable, now it was altogether too close at hand and most undesirable. His father's reference to the stupidity of the police persuaded him finally that his whereabouts were unknown, but how long they would remain so was of course a question. It was useless to attempt further concealment. In the first place, he lacked means of moving, nor could he conceal his identity under an assumed name while he remained in Panama, for he had already advertised himself too well for that. Besides, the idea of hiding did not appeal to him. He decided to face it out, therefore, hoping sometime to get to the bottom of the affair. If he were arrested meanwhile, he would have to locate Ringold or Higgins, or some of the others, and prove that he had not run away from punishment. It would be difficult to verify the extravagant story of his kidnapping, of course, but—there was nothing else to do. He rose quickly and entered the hotel, where he bought all the latest New York papers. It was not long before he found the thing he was seeking. There it was, a story headed:

SALOON−KEEPER TO LOSE LICENSE
OWNER OF NOTORIOUS AUSTRIAN VILLAGE IN TROUBLE

There followed an account of Mr. Padden's efforts to disprove his connection with an assault upon the person of a detective named Williams, who had come from St. Louis; but nowhere was there a word about the present condition of the plain−clothes man, nor the slightest hint toward explaining the conduct of the mysterious Jefferson Locke for whom he had been searching. Who the devil was Locke, anyhow? The article did not even state the charge upon which he was to be arrested. In another paper Kirk found something that relieved his mind a bit: evidently Williams had not died prior to the time of going to press, although he was reported in a critical condition. Kirk was interested to read that the police had a clew to the identity of the criminals and were confident of soon rounding them up. What mystified him most was the lack of detail. Evidently much had been printed previously, but he had no means of ascertaining what it was.

He spent an hour in serious thought, perhaps the first full hour he had ever passed so profitably. At the end of that time he had arrived at little save a vague feeling of offence toward the father who had been so ready to condemn him. In one way he did not blame the old gentleman for refusing aid. This episode was the culmination of a long series of reckless exploits. Mr. Anthony had argued, threatened, even implored with tears in his eyes, all to no purpose. Just the same, it hurt to have one's father so willing to believe the worst. The two had never understood each other; they did not understand each other now. And they might have been such good pals! Darwin K. did not believe in miracles—Well, perhaps Kirk was hopelessly bad. The young man did not care much, one way or the other; but he shut his teeth grimly and wagered he could make good if he really chose to try. He half decided to make the experiment just to show what he could do, but he was at a loss where to begin. Anybody could be successful who really wanted to— every book said that; the hard part was to get started.

One thing was clear, at least: he could stay here no longer as the Cortlandts' guest—he had already incurred an obligation which he would have difficulty in discharging. Yet how could he explain his change of front? Mrs. Cortlandt, he felt sure, would understand and come to his assistance with good advice, but he shrank instinctively from laying the facts before her husband. It was a deuced unpleasant necessity, and he detested unpleasant necessities—necessities of any sort, in fact. Still, there was nothing else for it, so, conquering his sense of humiliation as best he could, he called up the Cortlandts' suite.

Edith answered, saying that her husband was out; then, in response to his request, she came down herself.

"What has gone wrong? Why this face of tragedy?" she inquired, as she seated herself beside him.

"I've received my Declaration of Independence. I've heard from my dad."

A look of quick understanding drove away the smile she had brought him, and her manner was one of grave

sympathy as she took the letter he handed her.

She was clad in a crisp morning gown he had never seen, and he thought it became her extremely well. She looked very cool, very fresh, very much the fine lady. All in all, she seemed a person whose friendly interest might compensate for many woes.

"Well!" she remarked. "You do seem to be in trouble. What does it mean?"

Kirk told her everything without reserve, then showed her the newspapers in his hand. She scrutinized them with a quiet seriousness that seemed to make his trouble her own. "After all," she said at last, "if worse comes to worst, you can prove your innocence."

"I'm not so sure."

"Nonsense! Those boys can be found. What puzzles me is that Locke person. Who is he? Why was he followed? What has become of him?"

"I wish I knew."

"I can have inquiries made, but it will take time. Meanwhile, it seems you are safe, so the one important fact for the moment is that you are cast off." Turning her bright eyes upon him, she inquired, "How does it feel to be disinherited?"

"Blamed uncomfortable! I must tell Mr. Cortlandt at once."

"Let me," she offered, quickly. "I would not show any one that letter, if I were you, nor advertise the fact that you are in danger of arrest. It will be quite enough if I tell him that you have quarrelled with your father—he is a peculiar man."

Kirk signified his agreement.

"Now what do you intend doing?" she asked him.

"I'm going to work."

"Good! Good!" She clapped her hands gleefully.

"Oh, I don't WANT to," he protested, "but the old gentleman thinks I'm no good, and I'd like to show him he's wrong. After I've done that, I intend to loaf again—yes, and I'll know how to loaf by that time. Of course, I'll have to pay my debts, too."

"Poor Mr. Weeks!"

"Why poor?"

"He is terribly agitated to learn that we came to your rescue. He knows now that he really entertained an angel unaware, and his grief of soul is comical."

"Weeks isn't such a bad sort."

But her eyes showed a sudden flash of anger as she returned: "He deserves to be forced out of the service."

"That wouldn't do any good. His successor might be worse."

"Haven't you any resentment? I dislike placid people!"

"Plenty! If I get a crack at Alfarez—−"

"Now don't allow your mind to dwell on that," she cautioned. "I think he is riding to a fall, as it is. What do you want to do?"

"Anything. I'm going to hunt a job this afternoon."

"What sort?"

"Something with big pay and no responsibility."

"Those positions are taken—by the army," she laughed. "What can you do?"

"I can take an automobile apart."

"And put it together again?"

"Oh no! I can sail a boat; I shoot pretty well; I waltz nicely; I row, swim, and box indifferently; and I play an atrocious hand at poker."

Mrs. Cortlandt nodded gravely. "You are also good company, you dress well, and you are an ornament to any hotel porch."

"Naturally, I refrained from mentioning those things, but, in addition, I smoke, drink, and swear. I am unsteady in my habits, and require a great deal of sleep. I think that completes the inventory."

"Of course, you will live beyond your salary?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Seriously, now, don't you really—−?"

"Go ahead. Say it! Don't I know anything? No. I am too highly educated. You see, I took the full college course."

She drew her sharply pencilled brows together and pursed her lips in meditation, regarding him meanwhile with a, look that was not all disapproval.

"Am I hopeless?" he inquired at length.

"Dear, no! Experience is a good thing, of course, and ability is even better, but neither is absolutely necessary in government work."

"Oh!"

"Provided—−"

"What?"

"—You have influence. I was merely trying to think of the niche into which you would best fit."

"When a fellow hasn't any of those qualifications, then what? Take me, for instance."

"You have at least one."

"Which one?"

"Influence."

He shook his head. "My father wouldn't help."

"We'll have no difficulty in finding you a position."

"Jove! That's good news." He beamed at her with gratified surprise. "I had an idea I'd be going from door to door."

"How ridiculous! This is a government job; therefore it is saturated with politics. There are a great many good men on it, but there are also a large number of 'somebody's relatives.' Do you understand? Anything is possible here for a man with influence. If he has ability with it, he can go to the top. If he lacks ability—well, even then he can go to the top—it depends entirely upon the influence."

"But I haven't any—" Kirk began. Then, catching her look, he exclaimed: "Oh, say! WILL you help me? Really? That's too good to be true."

He shook her hand warmly, that being the natural outlet for his gratitude, and she smiled at him. "I wonder where I'd better start in," he said.

"There's not the slightest choice. All paths lead up the mountain, and if you go far enough you will reach the top. It would be quite easy if you knew something about the railroad business, for instance."

"Oh, I do. I've had that drilled into me ever since I was a child. I grew up with it—was soaked in it. My father made me learn telegraphy before he gave me a motor−boat."

"Why in the world didn't you say so?"

"Well, I have forgotten most of it," he confessed. "I had a railroad of my own, too, when I was twelve years old. I was president."

"Indeed!"

"I suppose it was in my blood. We kids stole the lumber for a track, and I got a hand−car from dad. We formed a close corporation, and, when another boy wanted to join, we made him go forth and steal enough boards to extend the line. We finally had nearly two miles, altogether, with switches, sidings, yards, and everything; then the fences in that neighborhood gave out. It was a gravity road—yes, there was extreme gravity in every department—we'd push the car up and ride down. We had a telephone system and semaphores, and ran on orders just like a real train. Grown people heard about it, and paid us five cents a ride, so we began to declare dividends every Saturday. Oh, it was a great success. We had a complete organization, too; president, directors, conductors, section−hands—the section−hands did all the work and rode between times."

"What happened to it?"

"One day we ran into a cow and broke the vice−president's leg. The board of directors also had his ear cut, and the indignant neighbors began to reclaim their fences. We lost a mile of track in one afternoon, and father decided it would be better for me to go to boarding−school. It was safer."

"I'll warrant you learned the rudiments of railroading, just the same."

"I learned everything," Kirk announced, decisively.

"Unfortunately, the P.R.R. has a president, so we can't start you in where you left off."

"He might need an assistant."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed lightly. "While we are finding that out," she said, "I think you had better go over the line in daylight and really see what this work is like. That glimpse you had at Gatun is only a small part. Now, will you trust me to manage this for you, Mr. Anthony?"

"I should say I would, and I can't begin to tell you—"

"Oh, it's nothing." She rose to put her plans promptly into operation, this time extending her hands with the words: "Let me congratulate you. I really believe you are waking up, and without the woman's aid."

"But the woman is aiding me," he replied, warmly. "She's doing it all. You have started me moving, and I'll never be able to thank you." Then, as her eyes flashed to his with a look he had never seen before, he added: "Understand, though, I am going to work only because I must. I detest it."

XI. THE TRUTH ABOUT MRS. CORTLANDT

Edith Cortlandt was not the sort to permit delay. At lunch she introduced Kirk to the Master of Transportation of the Panama Railroad, saying:

"Mr. Runnels has offered to take you out through the Cut this afternoon, and explain the work to you."

Runnels, a straight, well−set−up, serious young man, bent a searching look upon Kirk, as he said, "Mrs. Cortlandt tells me you're going to be one of us."

"Yes."

The Master of Transportation took in the applicant fully, then nodded his head as if pleased with his inspection.

"That's good."

Anthony was drawn to the speaker instantly, for there was no affectation about him. He was straightforward and open, little given to the kind of small talk that serves in so many cases to conceal character. He produced the effect of a busy and forceful man; one could feel energy radiating from him, and his voice had a ring of authority. Like every one down here who was doing something, he talked of little besides the Big Job, even when Mr. Cortlandt joined the trio. As the two younger men rose to leave, Edith playfully admonished him to teach his protege the entire detail of the railroad business and have him back in time for dinner, to which he agreed.

"She's wonderful," he remarked a moment later, as he and Kirk descended the hotel steps together. "She told Colonel Jolson he'd just have to find you a position, and I have been delegated to show you about."

"You don't say. I supposed there were plenty of openings."

"Not good ones. However, she usually gets what she wants. If I'm not a good guide, you must put it down to inexperience."

"The Cortlandts seem to have considerable influence for outsiders. I thought I'd have to begin at the bottom."

Runnels glanced at his companion quickly.

"Outsiders! You don't call them outsiders?"

"I never quite figured out who they are. Funny, by−the−way, how everybody says 'they' in referring to them."

"Oh, she's the whole team. Cortlandt's a nice fellow—but—Did you really think that she'd let you start at the bottom?"

"Why, yes."

"I guess you don't know her."

"You're right; I do not."

"Well, she knows everybody and everything in this country. She's the whole diplomatic service. Take the Colombian trouble, for instance—"

"What trouble?"

"When Panama seceded. She manipulated that, or at least Steve Cortlandt did under her direction. She was the brains of the whole affair, however, and those New York lawyers merely did what she told them. It was one of the cleverest exploits on record. Colombia wouldn't let us build the Canal, so Panama seceded. War was declared, but the United States interfered in time to prevent bloodshed. One Chinaman was killed, I believe, by dropping a flat−iron on his toe, or something, and by the time the excitement had died out we had begun digging. She knows Central America like the palm of her hand. When she says Kirk Anthony wants a position, we hirelings jump about and see that he gets it. Oh, you'll have any job you want."

"Well!" The recipient of this good news congratulated himself silently. "I wish you'd tell me something more about her."

"There isn't time just now; our motor is waiting. But we have the whole afternoon ahead of us."

The two passed through the railroad gates and took their places in the little car. When they were under way, Runnels went on: "I'm supposed to show you this end of the work and tell you what it all means."

"Then please start at the beginning. You see, I probably know less about it than anybody living."

"Of course you know the general lay−out?"

"I tell you I don't know a thing. There's no use four−flushing."

Runnels smiled at this candor. "Well, the ditch will be about fifty miles long, and, roughly speaking, the work is in three parts—the dredging and harbor−building at sea−level on each end of the Canal, the lock−work, and the excavations on the upper levels. That dam you saw building at Gatun will form a lake about thirty miles long—quite a fish−pond, eh? When a west−bound ship arrives, for instance, it will be raised through the Gatun locks, three of them, and then sail along eighty−five feet above the ocean, across the lake and into a channel dug right through the hills, until it reaches the locks at Pedro Miguel. Then it will be lowered to a smaller lake five miles long, then down again to the level of the Pacific. An east−bound ship will reverse the process. Get the idea?"

"Sure. It sounds easy."

"Oh, it's simple enough. That's what makes it so big. We've been working at it five years, and it will take five years more to complete it. Before we began, the French had spent about twenty years on the job. Now a word, so you will have the general scheme of operation in your head. The whole thing is run by the Isthmian Canal Commission—six men, most of whom are at war with one another. There are really two railroad systems—the I. C. C., built to haul dirt and rock and to handle materials in and out of the workings, and the Panama Railroad, which was built years ago during the California gold rush and bought by our government at the time of that terrible revolution I told you about. The latter is a regular system, hauls passengers and freight, but the two work together. You will start in with the P. R. R., Mr. Anthony, under my despotic sway."

"I know a little about railroading."

"So much the better. There's a big railroad man by your name in the States. Are you related?"

"I believe so," Kirk answered, quietly. "Go ahead with the lesson."

"The Canal Zone is a strip of land ten miles wide running across the Isthmus—really an American colony, you know, for we govern it, police it, and all that. As for the work itself, well, the fellows at the two ends of the Canal are dredging night and day to complete their part, the lock−builders are laying concrete like mad to get their share done first, the chaps in the big cut are boring through the hills like moles and breaking steam−shovel records every week, while we railroad men take care of the whole shooting−match. Of course, there are other departments—sanitary, engineering, commissary, and so forth—all doing their share; but that is the general scheme. Everybody is trying to break records. We don't think of anything except our own business. Each fellow believes the fate of the Canal depends upon him. We've lost interest in everything except this ditch, and while we realize that there is such a place as home, it has become merely a spot where we spend our vacations. They have wars and politics and theatres and divorces out there somewhere, but we don't care. We've lost step with the world, we've dropped out. When the newspapers come, the first thing we look for is the Panama news. We're obsessed by this job. Even the women and the children feel it—you'll feel it as soon as you become a cog in the machine. Polite conversation at dinner is limited to tons of rock and yards of concrete. Oh, but I'm tired of this concrete talk."

"Try the abstract for a change."

"It's interesting at first, then it gets tiresome. Lord! It's fierce."

"The work, too?"

"Everything! Every day you do the same thing; every day you see the same faces, hear the same talk; even the breeze blows from the same direction all the time, and the temperature stays at the same mark winter and summer. Every time you go out you see the same coach−drivers, the same Spiggoty policemen leaning against the same things; every time you come in you eat the same food, drink the same liquor, sit in the same chair, and talk about the same topics. Everything runs too smoothly. The weather is too damned nice. The thermometer lacks originality. We're too comfortable. Climate like that gets on a white man's nerves; he needs physical discomfort to make him contented. I'd give a forty−dollar dog to be good and cold and freeze my nose. Why, Doctor Gorgas has made us so sanitary that we can't even get sick. I'd hail an epidemic as a friend.

"It's even harder on the women folks, for they can't find anything to kick about, so they fuss with one another and with us. They have clubs, you know, to improve things, but there's nothing to improve. We had a social war recently over a button. One clique wanted a club emblem that would cost a dollar and a half, while the other faction were in favor of a dollar button. I tell you, it was serious. Then, too, we're all tagged and labelled like cans of salmon with the price−mark on—we can't four−flush. You can tell a man's salary by the number of rocking−chairs in his house, and the wife of a fellow who draws eighteen hundred a year can't associate with a

woman whose husband makes twenty−five hundred. They are very careful about such things. We go to the same dances on the same dates, we dance with the same people to the same tunes by the same band, and when we get off in some corner of the same veranda in search of the same old breeze, which we know is blowing at precisely the same velocity from the usual quarter, our partners tell us that Colonel So−and−So laid four hundred twenty−seven more cubic yards of concrete this week than last, or that Steam Shovel Number Twenty−three broke the record again by eighty yards. It's hell!" He stopped, breathless.

"Why don't you quit?" suggested Anthony.

"Quit! What for? Good Lord! We LIKE it. Here we are at Pedro Miguel, by−the−way. We'll be into the Cut shortly."

To his left Anthony beheld another scene somewhat similar to the one at Gatun. Other movable steel cranes, with huge wide−flung arms, rose out of another chasm in which were extensive concrete workings. From a distance the towers resembled parts of a half− constructed cantilever bridge of tremendous height. Another army was toiling at the bottom of the pit, more cars shunted back and forth, more rock−crushers rumbled; but, before Kirk's eye had photographed more than a small part, the motor−car had sped past and was rolling out upon a bridge spanning the Canal itself. To the northward appeared an opening cut through the hills, and Runnels said, simply:

"Culebra!"

A moment later he announced: "We leave the P. R. R tracks here and switch in on the I. C. C. Now you'll begin to see something."

Down into the Cut the little car went, and at last Anthony saw the active pulsating heart of this stupendous undertaking. The low range was severed by a gorge blasted out by human hands. It was a mountain valley in the making. High up on its sides were dirt and rock trains, dozens of compressed−air drills, their spars resembling the masts of a fleet of catboats at anchor—behind these, grimy, powerful steam shovels which rooted and grunted quite like iron hogs. Along the tracks at various levels flowed a constant current of traffic; long lines of empty cars crept past the shovels, then, filled to overflowing, sped away northward up the valley, to return again and again. Nowhere was there any idleness, nowhere a cold machine or a man at rest, On every hand was smoke and steam and sweat. The drills chugged steadily, the hungry iron hogs gouged out the trails the drills had loosened, the trains rolled past at intervals of a moment or so. Lines of electric wire, carried upon low wooden "shears," paralleled the tracks, bearing the white−hot sparks that rent the mountain, At every switch a negro flagman crouched beneath a slanting sheet of corrugated iron, seeking shelter alike from flying fragments and the blazing sun. From beneath the drills came occasional subterranean explosions; then geysers of muddy water rose in the air. Under the snouts of the steam shovels "dobe" shots went off as bowlders were riven into smaller fragments. Now and then an excited tooting of whistles gave warning of a bigger blast as the flagmen checked the flow of traffic, indicating with arms upraised that the ground was "coming up." Thereupon a brief lull occurred; men hid themselves, the work held its breath, as it were. But while the detonations still echoed, and before the flying missiles had ceased to shower, the human ants were moiling at their hills once more, the wheels were turning again, the jaws of the iron hogs were clanking.

Through this upheaval the motor−car penetrated, dodging trains of "flats," which moved sluggishly to afford them passage up and down over the volcanic furrows at the bottom of the gorge or along some shelf beneath which the foundations were being dug. At times a shovel reached out its five−yard steel jaw and gently cleared the rails of debris, or boosted some bowlder from the path with all the skill of a giant hand and fingers. Up and down the canon rolled spasmodic rumblings, like broadsides from a fleet of battle−ships.

"Somebody with a head for figures has estimated what it costs the government to send a motor−car like this through the Cut in working hours," Runnels said. "I don't remember the exact amount, but it was some thousands of dollars."

"Delays to trains, I suppose?"

"Yes. A minute here, thirty seconds there. Every second means a certain number of cubic yards unremoved, and holds back the opening of the Canal just so much. You have postponed a great event several minutes, Mr. Anthony."

"It's the first important thing I ever did."

"Our little nine−mile trip will cost Uncle Sam more than a brace of tickets from New York to 'Frisco and back

again, including Pullmans and travelling expenses."

Mile after mile the sight−seers rolled on, past scenes of never− varying activity—past more shovels, more groups of drills, more dirt trains, more regiments of men—Runnels explaining. Kirk marvelling until he was forced to exclaim:

"I had no idea it was so big. It doesn't seem as if they'd ever finish it."

"Oh, we'll finish it if we're let alone. Every year, you know, we receive a batch of senators and congressmen who come down to 'inspect' and 'report.' Sometimes they spend as much as a week on the job, and frequently learn to distinguish which is the Gatun dam and which the Culebra cut, but not always. Some of them don't know yet. Nevertheless, they return to Washington and tell us how to proceed. Having discovered that the Panama climate is good and the wages high, they send down all their relatives. It's too bad Colonel Gorgas did away with the yellow fever.

"You see there is too much politics in it; we never know how long our jobs will last. If some senator whose vote is needed on an administration matter wanted my position for his wife's brother, he could get it. Suppose the president of the Clock−Winders' Union wanted to place his half−sister's husband with the P. R. R. He'd call at the White House and make his request. If he were refused, he'd threaten to call a strike of his union and stop every clock on the Isthmus. He'd get the job all right."

"Of course, that is an exaggeration."

"Not at all. It has been done—is being done right along. The half−sister's husband comes down here and takes a job away from some fellow who may be entitled to promotion."

"I suppose I'm an example."

Runnels looked at him squarely before answering, "You are," said he, "although I wasn't thinking of you when I spoke. It's something we all feel, however."

Anthony flushed as he answered: "I don't remember ever taking anything I wasn't entitled to, and I didn't think when I was shoved in here that I'd shove some other fellow out."

"That's about what will happen. The good positions are filled by good men, for the most part, but Mrs. Cortlandt has asked it, and you're elected. You don't mind my frankness, I hope?"

"Certainly not. I just didn't happen to look at it in this light." Kirk felt a vivid sense of discomfort as the keen eyes of his companion dwelt upon him. "As a matter of fact, I dare say I don't need a good job half as badly as some of these married fellows. I suppose there is room at the bottom, and a fellow can work up?"

"If he has it in him."

"I think I'll start there."

"Oh, come, now," laughed the Master of Transportation, "that sort of thing isn't done. You have the chance, and you'd be foolish to let it slip. I don't blame you; I'd do the same under the circumstances. It's merely a condition we've all got to face."

"Just the same, I don't like the idea. I'd feel uncomfortable if I met some capable fellow whom I'd robbed of his chance. It's hard work to be uncomfortable, and I don't like hard work, you know."

Runnels shook his head doubtfully as if questioning the genuineness of this attitude.

"I'm afraid you're a poor business man," he said.

"Rotten!" Kirk admitted. "But I've an idea I can make good if I try."

"If you feel that way, I certainly will help you," said the other, warmly. "Of course, I'll try to help you anyhow, but—I like your spirit. With Mrs. Cortlandt to back me up, I'll see you go forward as fast as you deserve."

By now they were out of the Cut and once more upon the main line at Bas Obsipo, heading back toward the Pacific.

"You asked me to tell you something about her," Runnels continued.

"Yes."

"I'm not sure my information is entirely correct, but, knowing who she is, I think I understand why she is in Panama. It is politics —big politics. The Spiggoties have an election next year, and it is necessary to get our wires well laid before it comes off. General Alfarez will probably be the next president."

"Alfarez! Not Ramon?"

"His father. You know we Americans occupy a peculiar position here, set down as we are in the midst of an

alien people who hate us. Oh, they hate us, all right—all except a few of the better class."

"Why?"

"There are a good many reasons. For one thing, there's a sort of racial antipathy. You don't like them, do you? Well, they don't like you, either, and the same feeling exists from Mexico to Patagonia, although it is strongest in these regions. It is partly the resentment of an inferior race, I suppose. Then, too, when we stole Panama we made the Colombians sore, and all Central America besides, for they realized that once we Yankees got a foothold here we'd hang on and not only dominate this country but all the neighboring republics as well. That's just what we're beginning to do; that's why the Cortlandts are here. The stage is clearing for a big political drama, Mr. Anthony, which may mean the end of Latin Central America."

"I had gathered something of the sort—but I had no idea there was so much in it."

"The United States must protect its Canal, and to that end it is building 'stone quarries' on Ancon Hill which are really fortifications. American capital is coming in here, too, and in order to protect the whole thing we must dominate Panama itself. Once that is done, all the countries between here and the Texas border will begin to feel our influence. Why, Costa Rica is already nothing but a fruit farm owned by a Boston corporation. Of course, nobody can forecast the final result, but the Mexicans, the Hondurans, the Guatemalans, and the others have begun to feel it, and that's why the antiAmerican sentiment is constantly growing. You don't read much about it in the papers, but just live here for a while and you'll find out."

"Oh, I have," Kirk acknowledged, dryly. "But we don't want these jungle countries."

"That's where you're wrong. By−and−by we'll need room to expand, and when that time comes we'll move south, not north or west. Tropical America is richer than all our great Northwest, and we'll grab it sooner or later. Meanwhile our far−sighted government is smoothing the way, and there's nobody better fitted for the preliminary work than Mr. Stephen Cortlandt, of Washington, D. C., husband and clerk of the smartest woman in the business of chaperoning administrations."

"Oh, see here, now, Cortlandt is more than a clerk."

"He's an errand−boy. He knows it, she knows it, and a few other people know it. He's the figurehead behind which she works. She's a rich woman, she loves the game—her father was the greatest diplomat of his time, you know—and she married Cortlandt so she could play it. Any other man would have served as well, though I've heard that he showed promise before she blotted him out and absorbed him. But now he's merely her power of attorney."

Anthony pursed his lips into a whistle of astonishment. As usual, he reflected, his judgment had been strictly college−made.

"It's been a good thing for him," Runnels ran on, evidently warmed to his subject. "She's made his reputation; he has money and position. For my part, I'd rather remain insignificant and have a real wife, even if she does have hysterics over a club button."

"Don't they love each other?"

"Nobody knows. She's carved out of ice, and, as for him, well, gratitude is a good deal like rust—in time it destroys the thing it clings to. I suppose I'm talking too much, but others would tell you the same things. I consider her the smartest woman I ever met, and I admire her immensely. You are mighty fortunate to be her friend. She'll force you to the top in spite of yourself."

"I'm not sure I like that. It doesn't sound good."

"Oh, don't misconstrue what I've said," Runnels hastened to add. "She isn't that sort."

"I didn't mean that," said Kirk, briefly, and lapsed into a silence from which he roused only to discuss the details of his coming work.

It was with quite a different eye that he looked upon his host and hostess that evening. To his genuine liking for the latter was now added a worshipful admiration and a boyish gratification at her regard, which rather put her at a distance. When she questioned him on their way to the Plaza for the band concert later in the evening, he told her of his trip and of Runnels' kindness.

"It's all settled," said he. "I'm going to work in a few days as train collector."

"What?" Mrs. Cortlandt turned upon him sharply. "Runnels didn't offer you that sort of position?" Her eyes were dark with indignation. Kirk promptly came to the defence of his new friend.

"No, I asked for it."

"Oh, I see. Well, he will do much better by you than that."

"I don't want anything better to start with."

"But, my dear boy, a collector is merely a conductor. He takes tickets."

"Sure! I can DO that. I might fail at something hard."

"No, no, no! I'll see that you don't fail. Don't you understand?"

"I understand a lot more than I did, Mrs. Cortlandt. That's why I don't want to rob some chap of a job he's entitled to, and I sha'n't. There's a collector quitting shortly."

She stared at him curiously for a moment before inquiring:

"Is that really the reason, or do you think the work will be easier?"

Kirk stirred uncomfortably. "Oh, I'm not trying to dodge anything," he maintained. "On the contrary, the most amazing thing has happened—something I can't quite understand. I—I really want to work. Funny, isn't it? I didn't know people ever got that way, but—I'd like to help build this Canal."

"But a CONDUCTOR! Why, you're a gentleman."

"My dad was a brakeman."

"Don't be foolish. Runnels talks too much. He'll offer you something better than that."

"The high−salaried positions are well filled now, and most of the fellows are married."

"A new position will be created."

But Kirk was obdurate. "I'd prefer to start in as confidential adviser to the Canal Commission, of course, but I'd be a 'frost,' and my father would say 'I told you so.' I must make good for his sake, even if it's only counting cars or licking postage−stamps. Besides, it isn't exactly the square thing to take money for work that somebody else does for you. When a man tried for the Yale team he had to play football, no matter who his people were. If some capable chap were displaced to put in an incapable fellow like me, he'd be sore, and so would his friends; then I'd have to lick them. We'd have a fine scrap, because I couldn't stand being pointed out as a dub. No, I'll go in through the gate and pay my admission."

"Do you realize that you can't live at the Tivoli?"

"I hadn't thought about that, but I'll live where the other fellows do."

"No more good dinners, no drives and little parties like this."

"Oh, now, you won't cut me out just because I pull bell−cords and you pull diplomatic wires? Remember one of our champion pugilists was once a sailor."

Mrs. Cortlandt laughed with a touch of annoyance.

"It is utterly ridiculous, and I can't believe you are in earnest."

"I am, though. If I learn to be a good conductor, I'd like to step up. I'm young. I can't go back to New York; there's plenty of time for promotion."

"Oh, you'll have every chance," she declared. "But I think a few weeks in cap and buttons will cure you of this quixotic sentiment. Meanwhile I must admit it is refreshing." She stared unseeingly at the street lights for a moment, then broke out as a new thought occurred to her: "But see here, Kirk, don't the collectors live in Colon?"

"I don't know," he replied, startled and nattered by her first use of his given name.

"I'll look it up to−morrow. You know I—Mr. Cortlandt and I will be in Panama, and I prefer to have you here. You see, we can do more for you." A little later she broke into a low laugh.

"It seems strange to go driving with a conductor."

As they reclined against the padded seat of their coach, lulled by the strains of music that came to them across the crowded Plaza and argued their first difference, it struck the young man that Edith Cortlandt was surprisingly warm and human for a woman of ice. He fully felt her superiority, yet he almost forgot it in the sense of cordial companionship she gave him.

XII. A NIGHT AT TABOGA

Despite his great contentment in Mrs. Cortlandt's society, Kirk found himself waiting with growing impatience for his active duties to begin. There was a restlessness in his mood, moreover, which his desire to escape from a situation of rather humiliating dependence could not wholly explain. Curiously enough, this feeling was somehow connected with the thought of Edith herself. Why this should be so, he did not trouble to inquire. They had become the best of good friends, he told himself—a consummation for which he had devoutly wished—yet, for some indefinable reason, he was dissatisfied. He did not know that their moment of perfect, unspoiled companionship had come and gone that evening in the Plaza.

Every relation into which sentiment enters at all has its crisis or turning−point, though it may pass unobserved. Perhaps they are happiest who heed it least. Certainly, morbid self−analysis was the last fault of which Kirk could be accused. If he had a rule of action, it was simply to behave naturally, and, so far, experience had justified him in the belief that behaving naturally always brought him out right in the end.

He decided that he needed exercise, and determined to take a tramp through the country; but on the evening before the day he had set for his excursion his plans were upset by a note from Mrs. Cortlandt, which the clerk handed him. It ran:

DEAR KIRK,—Stephen has arranged an outing for all three of us, and we are counting on you for to−morrow. It will be a really, truly picnic, with all the delightful discomforts of such affairs. You are not to know where we are going until we call for you at eight.

Faithfully and mysteriously yours, EDITH CORTLANDT.

The recipient of this kind invitation tossed it aside with a gesture of impatience. For the moment he experienced a kind of boyish resentment at having his intentions thwarted that seemed out of proportion to the cause. Whether he would have felt the same if Edith's husband were not to be one of the party was a question that did not occur to him. At all events, the emotion soon passed, and he rose the next morning feeling that an outing with the Cortlandts would be as pleasant a diversion for the day as any other.

Promptly at eight Edith appeared upon the hotel porch. She was alone.

"Where's Mr. Cortlandt?" he inquired.

"Oh, some men arrived last night from Bocas del Toro and telephoned that they must see him to−day on a matter of importance."

"Then he's coming later?"

"I hardly think so. I was terribly disappointed, so he told me to go without him. Now, I shall have to make up to you for his absence, if I am able."

"That's the sort of speech," Kirk laughed, "that doesn't leave a fellow any nice answer. I'm sorry he couldn't come, of course, and awfully glad you did. Now, where is to be the scene of our revel?"

"Taboga," she said, with eyes sparkling. "You've never been there, but it's perfectly gorgeous. Please call a coach, our boat is waiting—and don't sit on the lunch."

Kirk obeyed, and they went clattering down the deserted brick street. Edith leaned back with a sigh.

"I'm so glad to get away from that hotel for a day. You've no idea how hard it is to be forever entertaining a lot of people you care nothing about, or being entertained by people you detest. I've smiled and smirked and cooed until I'm sick; I want to scowl and grind my teeth and roar."

"Still politics, I suppose?"

"Yes, indeed; we don't dare talk about it. If you only knew it, Kirk, you've capsized the political calculations of the Panama Conservative Party."

"I didn't know I had ever even rocked the boat."

"It runs back to your affair with Ramen." She glanced toward the coach driver, suggesting the need of reticence.

"Really, did that effect it?"

"Rather. At any rate, it gave an excuse for setting things in motion. There had been some doubt about the matter for a long time, and I was only too glad to exert my influence in the right direction, but—this is a picnic to

an enchanted island, and here we are talking politics! We mustn't be so serious. School is out, and it's vacation. I want to romp and play and get my face dirty."

Kirk readily fell in with her mood, and by the time they reached the water−front they were laughing like two children. Down through a stone arch they went, and out upon a landing beneath the sea wall. In front of them the placid waters of the bay were shimmering, a myriad of small boats thronged the harbor. There were coasting steamers, launches, sail−boats, skiffs, and canoes. Along the shore above the tide−line were rows of schooners fashioned from gigantic tree−trunks and capable of carrying many tons, all squatting upon the mud, their white sails raised to dry like the outstretched wings of resting sea−gulls.

The landing was thronged, and, at sight of the newcomers, loiterers gathered from all sides—a pirate throng, shouting a dozen dialects and forcing Kirk to battle lustily for his luggage. Stepping into a skiff, they were rowed to a launch, and a few moments later were gliding swiftly around the long rock−rib that guards the harbor, a copper−hued bandit at the wheel, a Nubian giant at the engine, and an evil, yellow−faced desperado sprawling upon the forward deck.

Looking back, they saw the city spread out in brilliant panorama, clear and beautiful in the morning radiance. Packed and dense it lay, buttressed by the weather−stained ramparts which legend says were built by the women while their husbands were at war, and backed by the green heights of Ancon, against which the foreign houses nestled. Set in the foreground, like an ivory carving, was the Government Theatre, while away beyond it loomed the Tivoli.

Noting armed sentinels pacing the sea wall at a certain spot, Kirk called his companion's attention to them.

"That's Chiriqui Prison, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes. They say some of the dungeons are almost under the sea. It must be a terrible place."

"I've developed a morbid interest in jails," he remarked. "I'm quite an authority on them. I think, however, I won't experiment with this one—I don't like the view."

"Yes, it's an unhealthy spot, according to all accounts. I'm sure you'd get rheumatism, at least. By−the−way, do you notice the thickness of those walls? They say that a king of Spain was seen standing at his palace window one day staring anxiously toward the west. When a courtier presumed to ask him what he was looking at, he said, 'I am searching for those costly walls of Panama. They ought to be visible even from here.' They cost ten million dollars, you know, when dollars were worth a good deal more than they are now. Look! There's Taboga."

Following her gaze, Kirk beheld a mountain of amethyst rising out of the bay. Behind them the shores stretched away into misty distances, while low mountains, softened by a delicate purple, rolled up from the jungle plain. Ahead of them the turquoise waters were dotted by islets whose heights were densely overgrown, while sands of coral whiteness ringed their shore lines. Here and there a fleet of fishing−boats drifted. Far out in the roadstead lay two cruisers, slate−gray and grim. The waters over−side purled soothingly, the heavens beamed, the breeze was like a gentle caress. The excursionists lost themselves in silent enjoyment.

Even before they had come to anchor a dozen boatmen were racing for them and crying for their patronage. At the water's edge they saw a tiny village nestled close against the mountains, its tiled roofs rust−red and grown to moss, its walls faded by wind and weather to delicate mauves and dove colors and greens impossible to describe. Up against the slope a squat 'dobe chapel sat, while just beyond reach of the tide was a funny little pocket−size plaza, boasting a decrepit fountain and an iron fence eaten by the salt. Backing it all was a marvellous verdure, tipped up on edge, or so it seemed, and cleared in spots for pineapples.

The launch, when it came to rest, seemed suspended in air, and beneath it lay an entrancing sea−garden. Once the engine had stopped its clatter, a sleepy, peaceful silence settled over the harbor, unbroken by wheel or whistle, for in Taboga no one works and there are no vehicles.

"What a wonderful place!" exclaimed the young man, fervently. "Why, it's like a dream—it can't be real!" Then, as the boatmen renewed their begging, "I wonder which barge gentleman I had better hire."

"Take the little boy, please." Edith called to an urchin who was manfully struggling with a pair of oars twice his own length, whereupon the older boatmen began to shove off with many scowls and much grumbling.

"Our choice has offended these genial bandits," Kirk observed as he helped her to a seat. "When shall we tell the lad to bring us off?"

"Four o'clock," answered Mrs. Cortlandt. "I arranged with the captain to be ready at that hour, so, you see, we have the whole day ahead of us."

Across the limpid shallows they glided, bravely propelled by their nine−year−old oarsman, but when the bow of their skiff grated upon the bottom they were still some yards from the shore.

"Looks as if we'd have to wade," said Kirk, then called to one of the near−by boatmen to lend the child a hand. But the fellow replied gruffly in some unintelligible jargon.

"He says he carries HIS passengers ashore in his arms," Edith translated.

"Really? Competition is spirited even on this heavenly isle. Well, that's easy!" Anthony untied his low shoes, kicked them off, and rolled up his trousers.

"Permit me to help you," he said, "without embarrassing our pilot."

"Oh! I want to wade, too," the woman exclaimed, enviously, as he stepped out, "but—it's too pebbly."

She stood up and allowed him to gather her in his arms. Then for the first time she felt his strength as her body leaned to his. Slowly he picked his way ashore while she reclined in his embrace, her arms about his neck, her smooth cheek brushing his. A faint, intoxicating perfume she used affected him strangely, increasing the poignant sense of her nearness; a lock of her hair caressed him. When he deposited her gently upon her feet he saw her face had gone white and that she was trembling.

"Did I hurt you?" he queried, quickly.

"Oh no!" she answered, but as she turned away he saw her breathe as if for the first time since he had taken her up.

His own face was glowing as he waded back to fetch the lunch− basket and his foot−gear. Under the circumstances he had done the only natural, the only possible thing, yet it had queerly perturbed them both. There was an artificial note in their voices as they mounted to the village, and unconsciously they avoided each other's glances.

A narrow, crooked street, fronted by old stone houses, opened before them, and the many tints they had seen from a distance became more pronounced. Even the rough flags and cobbles under foot were of a faint lichen gray, chrome yellow, or pink, as if painted at cost of infinite labor. Out of dark, open doorways peered swarthy faces, naked bronze children scampered away on fat legs at their approach, and in one house were a number of cassocked priests droning in Spanish. Everywhere was the same slumberous content, the same peaceful buzz of bees and birds and soft−toned human voices.

The two visitors explored the village, even to the quaint, tawdry chapel, with its impossible blues and rusted gilt, and noon found them eager to investigate the contents of their lunch−basket. Taking a random path up the hill, they came at last to a spring of cool water, and here they spread their meal under a mango−tree bent beneath tons of fruit.

"Oh, it's intoxicating!" cried Edith, as she sank to a seat, feasting her eyes upon the scene below. "After lunch, shall we climb the mountain?"

"I'm ready for anything," Kirk assured her. "Maybe we'll go swimming. That seems to be the main occupation of the inhabitants."

Up the path toward them came two timid children, one bearing a pineapple half as large as himself, the other lugging an armful of strange fruit. Kirk bought their entire burden, and they scuttled away in high glee.

By now the spirit of the woods was in the picnickers; the gladness of the day possessed them wholly, and the afternoon sped quickly. If at times Kirk found his companion regarding him with a strangely timid, half−defiant look, he refused to connect it with the episode of their landing. It was a fleeting look, at most, gone almost before he surprised it, and, for the most part, Edith showed a seemingly quite natural gayety that helped him to forget his recent self−consciousness.

Promptly at four they came down the drunken little main street and out upon the beach. But no launch was in sight.

"Hello! Where's our boat?" exclaimed Kirk.

"The captain told me he'd be ready at four. Perhaps he has run over to Taboguilla or—" She hesitated, with a troubled frown.

"You told him to wait?"

"Distinctly." Seeing an idler in the square above she questioned him in Spanish. "This man says the launch left for Panama two hours ago." She turned tragic eyes upon Kirk.

"Do you think they intend to leave us?"

"I don't know. These people are liable to do any thing." Once more she questioned the loiterer. "It is just as I suspected," she explained; "they went on a Sunday spree. He says they came ashore and bought a lot of liquor, and he heard them quarrelling later."

"That means we'll have to get another boat."

"I don't know where we shall find one."

"Neither do I, but there must be some sort of craft that plies back and forth regularly."

"Only once or twice a week, I believe, and it belongs to the sanitarium." She nodded toward some buildings perched upon a point farther around the bay. "Mr. Cortlandt looked it up before leaving and found the boat doesn't run on Sundays, so he hired that launch. Perhaps we'd better wait awhile; our men may come back."

They found seats in the square and were grateful for the rest; but an hour passed and the sun was getting low, while no sign of their truant craft appeared.

"There must be sail−boats to be had," said Kirk; but on inquiry they learned that, although a few belonged to the island, they all happened to be away. He suggested that they hire a man to row them across.

"It's twelve miles," Edith demurred. "Do you think it would be safe?"

He scanned the twilit sea and gave up the idea; for the afternoon trades, balmy and soothing as they were, had lifted a swell that would prove difficult for a skiff to navigate. Uneasily they settled themselves for a further wait. At last, as the sun was dipping into a bed of gold, Kirk broke out:

"Gee whiz! We've got to do SOMETHING. Mr. Cortlandt will be getting worried."

"In all probability he won't know anything about it until too late to come for us. He is dining with these people from Bocas, and may not get back to the Tivoli before midnight."

"Nice fix we're in!" remarked Anthony. "I'd like to lay hands on that captain."

"We may have to stay here all night!"

"Well, at least we have a haven of refuge. They'll take us in at the hospital."

"I don't care to ask them. There's some one up there I don't wish to see. That's why I didn't go near the place to−day."

"You know best, of course. But, see here, don't you think you'd better go up there—"

"Not for worlds! We must find some other way." She began to pace back and forth in the dusk. "How unfortunate it is!"

"Is it because—I'm with you?" questioned the young man, with an effort. "Is that why you don't want to apply there?"

"No, no. Stephen's particular enemy is in charge up there. I detest the man, and the feeling is mutual, I believe." She sighed, and her glance fell. "We can't spend the night outdoors."

"Of course not, but—"

"What?"

He laughed to hide his embarrassment. "I'm wondering—what people will say."

"Oh, you mustn't be troubled about that. It isn't your fault, you know, anyhow. Besides, people won't say anything because they won't know anything about it—if we stay away from that sanitarium."

In the effort to put him at his ease, her own distress seemed to vanish, and Kirk immediately felt more cheerful.

"It's getting along toward dinner−time," he said, "so let's see what we can find in the way of food. You can be sheltered in one of these houses, I suppose, though from the looks I'd almost prefer the night air."

They stumbled out into the unlighted street and began their search; but, seen close at hand, the cooking arrangements of Taboga proved most unattractive. Outside the sanitarium, it seemed, there was not a stove on the island. Charcoal braziers set upon the floors or in the dirt yards served all culinary purposes, and the process of preparing meals was conducted with an indifference that promised no savory results. About the glowing points of light wrinkled hags appeared irregularly, as if brewing some witch's broth, but they could not understand the phenomenon of Americans being hungry and signified no readiness to relieve them. In several instances Kirk and Mrs. Cortlandt were treated with open suspicion. But eventually they found a more pretentious− looking place, where they were taken in, and, after an interminable wait, food was set before them—chicken, boiled with rice and cocoanut, black beans and cocoanut, fresh, warm milk, and a wondrous assortment of hothouse fruits. They would have enjoyed the meal had it not been for the curious faces that blocked every aperture in the room and the

many bright eyes that peered at them from each shadow.

But in spite of their equivocal situation, Edith seemed fully to have regained her spirits. Even the prospect of spending the night in this place apparently did not dismay her.

"We have created quite a sensation," she said, laughingly. "I wonder if it makes the animals in the zoo as nervous to be stared at."

Kirk was half puzzled, half relieved by the lightness of her mood.

"If you have finished this health−food," he remarked, "we'll go back to the plaza and wait for the launch. I'm as full of cocoanut as a shell."

They descended to the square again, stared at all the way through open doors and followed by a subdued murmur of comment. Then they sat for a long time watching the stars, half minded not to regret the circumstance that had left them stranded together in such pleasant surroundings.

As if in despair over their impossible predicament, Edith gave way to a spirit of reckless vivacity, and Kirk, with a man's somewhat exaggerated sympathy for a woman's sensitive feelings, loyally strove to help her make the best of things in her own way. It was like a woman, he reflected, to follow her mood to the last extreme, and, being a man, he was not displeased. The change in her manner was too elusive for him to analyze. There was no real concession of her reserve—no sacrifice of the feminine privilege of prompt and complete withdrawal. If he had struck a false note, he knew that she would have turned frigid in an instant. But he could not help feeling that some barrier which had existed between them had been magically removed. Her apparent obliviousness to all that under the circumstances might have troubled her was a subtle compliment to himself, and soon he, too, forgot that there was anything in the world beyond their present relation to each other.

It was on their return to the house that the climax came, leaving him strangely shaken.

Their course took them past a tiny cantina. It was open in front, and brightly lighted, although at this hour most of the houses were dark and the village lay wrapped in the inky shadow of the mountain behind. Within, several men were carousing—dark−haired, swarthy fellows, who seemed to be fishermen. Drawn by the sound of argument, the strangers paused a moment to watch them. The quarrel seemed a harmless affair, and they were about to pass on, when suddenly one of the disputants lunged at his antagonist with a knife, conjured from nowhere, and the two came tumbling out into the street, nearly colliding with the onlookers.

Without a sound, Mrs. Cortlandt picked up her skirts and fled into the darkness, Kirk stumbling along behind her, both guiding themselves by instinct rather than sight. At last she stopped out of breath, and he overtook her.

"You mustn't run through these dark alleys," he cried, sharply. "You'll break your neck." Half impatient at this hysterical behavior, he seized her by the arm.

"Oh, I'm so frightened!" she breathed, and he felt her tremble. "A drunken man frightens me—" Involuntarily she hid her face against his breast, then laughed nervously. "Don't mind me, please. It's the one thing I can't stand. I'll be all right in a moment." She lifted her white face, and her eyes were luminous in the gloom. "I'm very glad you don't drink." Her hand crept up to the lapel of his coat. "What will you think of me?" she said, tremulously.

Before he realized what he was doing his arms had closed around her and his lips had met hers. It may have been the romance of the night, the solitude, the intoxicating warmth of her breath—at any rate, he lost his head and knew nothing save that she was a woman and he a man. As for her, she offered no resistance, made no sign beyond a startled sigh as their lips came together.

But, impulsive as his action had been, it was no more sudden than his recoil. He released her and stepped back, crying:

"Oh, my God! I—I didn't mean that. Forgive me. PLEASE." She said nothing, and he stammered desperately again: "You'll hate me now, of course, but—I don't know what ails me. I forgot myself—you— everything. It was unpardonable, and I ought to be shot." He started off down the blind street, his whole body cold with apprehension and self−disgust.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"I don't know. I can't stay here now. Oh, Mrs. Cortlandt, what can I say?"

"Do you intend to leave me here in the middle of this—"

"No, no! Of course not. I'm rattled, that's all. I've just got a cowardly desire to flee and butt my head against the nearest wall. That's what I ought to do. I don't know what possessed me. I don't know what you'll think of me."

"We won't speak of it now. Try to compose yourself and find our lodging−place."

"Why, yes, of course. I'll see that you're fixed up comfortably and then I'll get out."

"Oh, you mustn't leave me!" she cried in a panic. "I couldn't stay in that awful place alone." She drew a little nearer to him as if demanding his protection.

A wave of tenderness swept over him. She was just a girl, after all, he reflected, and if it were not for what had happened a moment before the most natural thing in the world would be to take her in his arms and comfort her.

"I—I won't leave you—I'll stay near you," he stammered.

But as they trudged along together through the dark his chagrin returned in full force. Mrs. Cortlandt maintained a distressing silence, and he could not see her face. Presently he began to plead brokenly for forgiveness, stumbling in the effort not to offend her further and feeling that he was making matters worse with every word he uttered. For a long time she made no reply, but at last she said:

"Do you think I ought ever to see you again after this?"

"I suppose not," said Kirk, miserably.

"I won't believe," she went on, "that you could have taken me for the kind of woman who—"

"No, no!" he cried, in an anguish of self−reproach. "I was a fool—"

"No," she said, "I don't—I couldn't bear to think that. Perhaps I was partly to blame—but I didn't think—I ought to have known that no man can really be trusted. But I thought our friendship was so beautiful, and now you've spoiled it."

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Kirk. "Say you'll forgive me some time."

But instead of answering him directly she proceeded in the same strain, probing his wounded self−respect to the quick, making his offence seem blacker every moment.

Although he assured her over and over that he had simply followed the irresponsible, unaccountable impulse of a moment—that he had regarded her only as the best of friends, and respected her more than he could say, she showed him no mercy. The melancholy, regretful tone she adopted was ten times worse than anger, and by the time they reached the inn where they had dined he was sunk in the depths of self−abasement.

If he had been less preoccupied with his own remorse he might have reflected that Edith's attitude, especially as she did not expressly withhold the prospect of ultimate pardon, established a closer bond between them than ever before. But there was no room in his mind for such a thought.

In reply to his knock an old woman came to the door and sleepily admitted them. Edith stood for a moment on the threshold, then, seeing that he made no motion to accompany her, she said good− night, and, quietly entering, closed the door behind her.

Kirk experienced a sudden desire to escape. To remain where he was simply prolonged his humiliation. Instinctively he felt that, if he could only get away where he could view the matter in an every− day light, it would cease to trouble him. But evidently he could not desert Edith. He sat down upon the doorstep and gave himself up to bitter thoughts.

She was such a wonderful woman, he told himself; she had been such a true friend to him that he had been worse than criminal to lose her respect. And Cortlandt had been so decent to him! It was significant that this gave him the most discomfort of all. He had betrayed a man's friendship, and the thought was unbearable. No punishment could be too severe for that!

He was still sitting there cramped and stiff when the first faint flush of dawn stole over the hill−crest behind him. Then he rose to wander toward the water−front. As the harbor assumed definite form, he beheld a launch stealing in toward the village, and ten minutes later greeted Stephen Cortlandt as that gentleman stepped out of the tender.

"Where's Edith?" eagerly demanded her husband.

"She's asleep. I found a place for her—"

"Not at the SANITARIUM?"

"No, no. One of these houses. Lord, I'm glad to see you! We'd begun to feel like real castaways. I've been up all night."

"What happened?" It was plain that Mr. Cortlandt was deeply agitated.

"Our boatmen evidently got drunk and pulled out. I tried to get a sail−boat, but there weren't any, and it was too rough to try crossing with a skiff."

It took them but a moment to reach the house, and soon the three were back at the water−front.

"What a miserable night!" Mrs. Cortlandt complained, stifling a yawn. "I thought you'd never come, Stephen!"

"I didn't get back to the Tivoli until midnight, and then I had trouble in finding a boat to bring me over."

"I suppose they were alarmed at the hotel?"

"I said nothing about it," he returned, quietly, at which his wife's face flushed. Seizing the first occasion, he exclaimed, in a low voice: "God! How unfortunate—at this time. Were you mad?"

She looked at him and her eyes burned, but she said nothing.

XIII. CHIQUITA

The next day Kirk borrowed a shot−gun and went hunting. The events of the night before seemed like a dream. Could it be that he had really blundered irretrievably? Was it possible that he had offended his best friend past forgiveness? He wanted to get away somewhere and collect his thoughts. For the present, at least, he wished to avoid an interview with Mrs. Cortlandt.

A mile or two beyond the railroad track, to the north and east, began what appeared to be an unbroken wilderness, and thither he turned his steps. Low, rolling hills lay before him, densely over− grown and leading upward to a mountain range which paralleled the coast until the distant haze swallowed it up. These mountains, he reflected with a thrill of interest, led on to South America, the land of the Incas, hidden in mystery as the forests close at hand were veiled in faint purple. The very thought was romantic. Balboa had strained his eyes along these self−same placid shores; Pizarro, the swineherd, had followed them in search of Dabaiba, that fabled temple of gold, leaving behind him a trail of blood. It was only yonder, five miles away, that Pedrarias, with the murder of a million victims on his soul, had founded the ancient city which later fell to Morgan's buccaneers. Even now, a league back from the ocean, the land seemed as wild as then. Anthony suspected that there were houses—perhaps villages—hidden from his view; but vast stretches of enchanted jungle intervened, which he determined to explore, letting his feet stray whither they would. If game, of which he had heard great stories, fell to his hand, so much the better.

Heeding a warning not to bear arms through the streets of Panama without a permit from the alcalde, he struck off across the fields in a bee−line for the woods. It was a vast relief to be out in the open air with a gun upon his arm once more, and he felt his blood coursing vigorously. The burden upon his spirits insensibly began to lighten. After all, he had done nothing for which he needed to be ashamed the rest of his life. Edith, of course, was right in being deeply offended. That was to be expected. Yet his conduct, regrettable as it was, had been only natural under the circumstances. Now that the first tumult of feeling had subsided, he found that his conscience did not accuse him very severely.

And, somehow, he was unable to believe that the breach with Edith would prove irreparable. She was a sensible woman of the world— not a mere school−girl. Perhaps when the immediate shock of the occurrence had passed she would consent to take a different view of it, and they might return to their old friendly footing. If not—well, he would be his own man soon, anyhow. Their lives would part, and the incident would be forgotten. He was sorry that in his momentary madness he had behaved improperly toward a woman to whom he owed so much, yet it was not as if he had shown meanness or ingratitude.

Across the meadows deep in grass he went, skirting little ponds and marshy spots, growing more cheerful with every step. In one place he had the good−luck to raise a flock of water birds, which he took for purple gallinule and spur−wing plover, although they were unlike any he had ever seen. In some scattered groves beyond he bagged a pigeon and missed a quail which unexpectedly whirred out of a thicket. Then he continued past herds of grazing cattle to another patch of woodland, where he came upon something that looked like a path. Through rankly growing banana−patches, yam− fields, and groves of mango−trees, he followed it, penetrating ever deeper into the rolling country, until at last he reached the real forest. He had come several miles, and realized that he could not retrace his steps, for the trail had branched many times; he had crossed other pathways and made many devours. He rejoiced in the thought that he had successfully lost himself.

At midday he paused in an open glade against a hillside to eat his lunch. Back of him the rising ground was heavily timbered; beneath him a confusion of thickets and groves and cleared fields led out to a green plain as clean as any golf links, upon which were scattered dwellings.

Evidently this was the Savannas of which he had heard so much, and these foreign−looking bungalows were the country homes of the rich Panamanians. Beyond, the bay stretched, in unruffled calm, like a sheet of quicksilver, its bosom dotted with rocky islets, while hidden in the haze to the southward, as he knew, were the historic Pearl Islands, where the early Spaniards had enriched themselves.

Gazing at this view in lazy enjoyment, Kirk found himself thinking how good it was to be young and free, and to be set down in such a splendidly romantic country. Above all, it was good to be heart− whole and unfettered by

any woman's spell—men in love were unhappy persons, harassed by a thousand worries and indecisions, utterly lacking in poise. It was a lamentable condition of hysteria with which he decided to have nothing to do. He did not care for women, anyhow. One could scarcely have any dealings with them without becoming involved in some affair that unduly harrowed one's feelings. How much better it was to know the clean spirit of adventure and the joy of living, undisturbed by feverish emotions!

As he reclined there, busied with these thoughts, two vivid little paroquets alighted near him, to quarrel noisily, then make up and kiss each other like any pair of lovers. It was disgusting. A toucan peered at him with an appearance of exaggerated curiosity, due to its huge, grotesquely proportioned beak. Now and then came the harsh notes of parrots as they fluttered high above the tree− tops. Meanwhile the young man's ears became attuned to the jungle noises, his eyes observant of the many kinds of life about him.

The wood was crowded with plant−life utterly strange to him. On the hill above towered a giant ceiba−tree, its trunk as smooth as if polished by hand and bare of branches except at the very top, where, instead of tapering, it ended abruptly in a tuft of foliage. Here and there stood tremendous cotton−trees, their limbs so burdened with air−plants as to form a series of aerial gardens, their twigs bearing pods filled with down. Beside them palm−trees raised their heads, heavy with clusters of nuts resembling dates in size and form, but fit only for wild pigs. Clumps of bamboo were scattered about, their shoots springing from a common centre like the streams from a fountain, and sweeping through graceful curves to a spray of shimmering green. He had never seen such varieties of growth. There were thick trees with bulbous swellings; tall trees with buttressed roots that ran high up the trunks; slender trees propped up head−high above the earth on tripod−like roots or clusters of legs; trees with bark that shone like a mirror; trees guarded with an impregnable armor of six−inch bony spikes—Kirk did not know the names of half of them, nor did he care to learn.

Vines and creepers abounded, from the tiny honeysuckle that reared itself with feeble filaments, to the giant liana creeping through the forest like a python, throttling full−grown trees in its embrace. On every side was the never−ceasing battle for light and the struggle of the weak against the strong. The air was heavy with the breath of triumphant blooms and the odor of defeated, decaying life. A thousand voiceless tragedies were being enacted; the wood was peopled by distorted shapes that spoke of forgotten encounters; rich, riotous, parasitic growths flourished upon starved limbs or rotting trunks. It was weird and beautiful and pitiless. Unlike the peaceful order of our Northern forests, here was a savage riot, an unending treacherous warfare without light or room or mercy. There was something terrible in it all.

Tiring of the scene at last, Kirk continued his wanderings, bearing gradually toward the right, that he might eventually emerge upon the Savannas below, where he knew there was a good paved road leading to the city. But the trails were devious and seemed to lead nowhere, so at last he struck out through the jungle itself. Having no machete with which to clear a way, his progress was slow, but he took his time, keeping a wary outlook for game, twisting back and forth to avoid the densest thickets, until he finally came out upon the margin of a stream. Through the verdure beyond it he saw the open, sunlit meadows, and he followed the bank in the hope of finding a foot−log or a bridge upon which to cross. He had gone, perhaps, a hundred yards when he stumbled out into a cleared space, where he paused with an exclamation of surprise.

The brook had been dammed and widened into a deep, limpid pool to which the clean, white sand of its bottom lent a golden hue. At the lower end it overflowed in a waterfall, the purling music of which rilled the glade. Overhead the great trees were arched together and interlaced, their lower branches set with flowering orchids like hothouse plants upon a window−ledge. The dense foliage allowed only a random beam of sunlight to pass through and pierce the pool, like a brilliant, quivering javelin. Long vines depended from the limbs above, falling sheer and straight as plumb−lines; a giant liana the size of a man's body twined up and up until lost in the tangle overhead.

Although set just within the border of the untouched forest, it was evident that this spot had been carefully cut away and artfully cultivated. But, if man's hand had aided nature by a few deft touches here and there and a careful pruning of her lavish riches, it could be seen that no human artist had designed the wondrous stage effect. To step suddenly out of an uncut wilderness into such a scene as this was bewildering, and made the American gasp with delight. The place had an air of strictest privacy. A spring−board mirrored in the depths below invited one to plunge, a pair of iron gymnasium rings were swung by chains to a massive limb, a flight of stone steps led up the bank and into a hut artistically thatched and walled with palm−leaves to harmonize with its setting. Kirk

thanked his fortune that he had not blundered in while the place was in use, for it had almost the sacred air of a lady's boudoir.

Instead of promptly withdrawing, he allowed his admiration full play, and stood staring for a long time. What a delightful nook in which to dream away the days! It was dim and cool and still, although outside its walls of green the afternoon sun was beating down fiercely. A stranger might pass and never guess its presence. It had been cunningly shaped by fairies, that was evident. Doubtless it was peopled by them also, and his mistake had been in coming upon it so suddenly. If he had approached with caution he would surely have surprised them at their play, for yonder was the music of their dances—that chuckling, singing waterfall could serve no other purpose. Perhaps one was hidden under it at present. Kirk was half tempted to conceal himself and wait for them to reappear, though he knew that it requires extraordinary cunning to deceive wood−sprites once they have been alarmed. But, undoubtedly, they were somewhere close by, probably watching him from behind the leaves, and if they were not such timid bodies he might try to search them out.

As it was, he took a lingering, farewell look and turned to retrace his steps, whereupon the queen fairy laughed at him softly. He paused abruptly, then turned around, with care, so as not to frighten her. But of course she was invisible. Then she spoke again with the sweetest foreign accent imaginable.

"You had better cross upon the waterfall, sir. There is no bridge above." After an instant, during which he strained his eyes to find her, she laughed again.

"Here I am, in the tree, across the pond."

"Oh!" Looking over the fork of a tree−trunk, perhaps twice the height of his head above the ground, Anthony beheld a ravishing face and two very bright eyes. Without removing his gaze, he leaned his gun carefully against a bush—firearms have an abominable effect upon hamadryads—and said:

"I knew you were here all the time."

"Indeed!" The eyes opened in astonishment. "You did not see me at all."

"Of course, but I knew you were somewhere close by, just the same. How did you get up there?"

"I climbed up."

"Why didn't you hide under the waterfall?"

"I did not hide, senor. I am trying to reach my orchid."

A little hand appeared beside the face, and a finger pointed to one of the big air plants above her. Kirk beheld a marvellous white, dove−shaped flower, nodding upon a slender stalk.

"I climbed up on the big vine; it is just like a ladder."

"Then you can't be the queen!"

Two very large, very dark eyes looked at him questioningly.

"Queens don't pick flowers," he explained. "They hide in 'em."

"The queen?"

"Some of them live in trees, and some preside over lakes and fountains. Which kind are you?"

"Oh! I am neither, I live in my father's house." She tossed her head in the direction of the Savannas behind her. "Do you wish to cross the stream?"

"If you please."

"Wait." The face disappeared. There was a sound from behind the twisted tree−trunk, a twig fell, then a piece of bark, and the next instant the girl herself stepped into view.

"I was afraid you'd gone for good," acknowledged the young man, gravely. He took up his gun and stepped out upon the crest of the dam.

"You must look where you go," she admonished, "or you will fall— splash!" She laughed delightedly at the thought, and he saw that her eyes had a way of wrinkling almost shut in the merriest fashion. He balanced upon the slippery surface of the waterway with the stream up to his ankles.

"Will you promise not to whisk yourself away if I look down?" he asked.

"Yes."

But even with this assurance he found it difficult to remove his eyes from her even for the brief instant necessary for a safe passage; and when at last he stood beside her he felt an irresistible desire to seize her gently so that she could not escape.

"Well?" she said at length, and he found he had been standing stock−still staring at her for several seconds.

"Excuse me! I really took you for a wood−nymph. I'm not sure yet— you see the place is so well suited. It—it was a natural mistake."

She dropped her eyes shyly and turned away at his look.

"It is only our swimming−pool. There have been no fairies here since I was a very little girl. But once upon a time there were many—oh, a great many." It was impossible to describe the odd, sweet sound her tongue gave to the English words. It was not a dialect, hardly an accent, just a delicious, hesitating mannerism born of unfamiliarity.

"Did you ever see them?"

"N−no! I arrived always a little too late. But there are such things."

He nodded. "Everybody knows that since 'Peter Pan.'"

Another shy glance told her that he was still regarding her with his look of wondering admiration. She pointed to a path, saying:

"This way will bring you to the road, sir, if you wish."

"But—I don't wish—not yet." He sought wildly for an excuse to stay, and exclaimed: "Oh, the orchid. I must get it for you."

"That will be very nice of you, sir. For two years I have awaited its blooming. If you had not arrived I would have got it, anyhow."

"Girls shouldn't climb trees," he said, severely. "It tears their dresses."

"Oh, one cannot tear a dress like this." She glanced down at her skirt. Allowing his eyes to leave her face for a moment, Kirk saw that she was clad, oddly enough, in a suit of denim, which was buttoned snugly clear to her neck. It struck him as most inappropriate, yet it was extremely well made, and he could not complain of the effect.

He broke his gun and removed the shells; then, leaving it beside the bath−house, went to the tree where he had first seen her. With one hand resting upon the trunk, he turned to say:

"Promise you won't disappear while I'm up there, or change into a squirrel, or a bird, or anything like that."

"What a funny man you are!"

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, yes."

"Do you live around here?"

"Of course."

"Why do you want this orchid?"

"To put it in the house."

Instead of beginning his climb, the young man lounged idly against the tree.

"Funny how I found you, wasn't it?" he remarked. "I mean it's funny I should have stumbled right on you this way—there's only one of you and one of me, and—er—this country is so big! I might have gone some other way and then perhaps we'd never have met." He contemplated this contingency for an instant. "And if you hadn't spoken I'd never have seen you, either."

"But I had to speak. You could not cross above."

"Awfully nice of you. Some people would have let me go away."

"But the orchid, senor. Do you fear to climb so high?" she inquired, with the faintest gleam of amusement at his obvious effort to prolong the conversation.

"Oh no!"

He cast about for something further to talk about, but, failing to find it, began slowly to clamber upward, supporting himself upon the natural steps afforded by the twining vine and the protuberances of the trunk itself.

When he had reached the first fork, he turned and seated himself comfortably, peering downward through the leaves for a sight of her.

"Not gone yet!" he exclaimed. "That's good."

"Are you out of breath that you stop so soon?"

He nodded. "I need to rest a minute. Say, my name is Anthony—Kirk Anthony." Then, after a pause, "I'm an American."

"So am I, at least I am almost. My mother was an American."

"You don't say!" The young man's face lighted up with interest, and he started eagerly down the tree−trunk,

but she checked him promptly.

"The orchid!"

"Oh yes!" He reseated himself. "Well, well, I suppose your mother taught you to speak English?"

"I also attended school in Baltimore."

Anthony dangled his legs from his perch and brushed aside a troublesome prickly pod that depended in such a position as to tickle his neck. "I'm from Yale. Ever been to New Haven? What are you laughing at?"

"At you. Do you know what it is which you are fighting from your neck?"

"This?" Kirk succeeded in locating the nettle that had annoyed him.

"Yes. It is cow−eetch. Wait! By−and−by you will scratch like everything." The young lady laughed with the most mischievous, elf−like enjoyment of this prospect.

"All right. Just for that, I will wait."

Now that the first surprise of meeting was over, Kirk began a really attentive scrutiny of this delightful young person. So far he had been conscious of little except her eyes, which had exercised a most remarkable effect upon him from the first. He had never cared for black eyes—they were too hard and sparkling, as a rule—but these—well, he had never seen anything quite like them. They were large and soft and velvety, like—like black pansies! That was precisely what they were, saucy, wide−awake black pansies, the most beautiful flower in all creation; and, while they were shadowed by the intangible melancholy of the tropics, they were also capable of twinkling in the most roguish manner imaginable, as at the present moment. Her hair was soft and fine, entirely free from the harsh lustre so common to that shade, and it grew down upon her temples in a way that completed the perfect oval of her face. His first glimpse had told him she was ravishingly pretty, but it had failed to show how dainty and small she was. He saw now that she was considerably below the usual height, but so perfectly proportioned that one utterly lost perspective. Even her thick, coarse dress could not conceal the exquisite mould in which she was cast. But her chief charm lay in a certain winsome vivacity, a willful waywardness, an ever−changing expression which showed her keenly alive and appreciative. Even now pure mischief looked out of her eyes as she asked:

"Have you rested enough to attack the orchid?"

"Yes." He roused himself from his trance, and with a strangely leaping heart proceeded carefully to detach the big air plant from its resting−place. The wonderful flower, nodding to his touch, was no more perfect than this dryad whom he had surprised.

"Don't break it," she cautioned as he came gingerly down the tree. "It is what we call 'Espiritu Santa,' the 'Holy Spirit' flower. See, it is like a white bird."

"First one I've seen," he said, noting how the purity of the bloom enhanced the olive of her cheek. Then he began another fruitless search for a topic of conversation, fearing that if he allowed the slightest pause she would send him away. But all his thoughts were of her, it seemed. His tongue would frame nothing but eager questions—all about herself. At last in desperation he volunteered to get another orchid; but the suggestion met with no approval. There were no more, she told him, of that kind.

"Maybe we can find one," he said, hopefully.

"Thank you. I know them all." She was looking at him now as if wondering why he did not make a start, but wild horses could not have dragged him away. Instead of picking up his gun, he inquired:

"May I rest a moment? I'm awfully tired."

"Certainly. You may stay as long as you wish. When you are rested the little path will bring you out."

"But you mustn't go!" he exclaimed, in a panic, as she turned away. "Oh, I say, please! You wouldn't do a thing like that?"

"I cannot speak to you this way, sir." The young lady blushed prettily.

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"Oh!" She raised her hand and shook her head to express the absolute impossibility of such a thing. "Already I have been terrible. What will Stephanie say?"

"You've been nothing of the sort, and who is Stephanie?"

"She is a big black woman—very fierce. It is because of Stephanie that the fairies have gone away from here."

"If we wait a minute, maybe they'll come out."

"No. I have waited many times and I never saw them."

"Somehow I feel sure we'll see 'em this time," he urged. Then, as she shook her head doubtfully: "Good heavens! Don't you want to see 'em? I'm so tired that I must sit down."

The corners of her eyes wrinkled as she said, "You are not very strong, senor. Have you been ill?"

"Yes—no. Not exactly." He led her to a bamboo bench beside the palm hut. "I've been hunting. Now won't you please tell me how you chanced to be here? I thought these country places were unoccupied at this season."

"So they are. But, you see, I am doing a penance."

"Penance! You?"

"Oh yes. And it is nothing to laugh about, either," she chided, as he smiled incredulously, "I am a bad girl; I am disobedient. Otherwise I would not allow you to speak to me alone like this. You are the first gentleman I have ever been so long in the company with, Senor Antonio."

"Really?"

"Now I will have to do more penance." She sighed sadly, but her eyes were dancing.

"I don't understand this penance affair. What do you do?"

She lifted a fold of her coarse denim dress. "For six months I must wear these garments—no pretty ones. I must not go out in public also, and I have been sent here away from the city for a time to cure my rebellious spirit."

"Those dresses must be hot."

"Oh, very uncomfortable! But, you see, I was bad."

"Not very bad?"

"Indeed. I disobeyed my father, my uncle, everybody." For the first time her eyes grew bright with anger. "But I did not wish to be married."

"Now, I see. They wanted you to marry some fellow you don't like?"

"I do like him—"

"You did exactly right to refuse. By all means stand pat, and don't—"

"'Stand pat.' I have not heard that word since I was in Baltimore."

"It's awful to marry somebody you don't like," he declared, with such earnest conviction that she inquired, quickly:

"Ah, then are you married?"

"No! But everybody says it's positively criminal to marry without love."

"The gentleman is very handsome."

He shuddered, "Beware of handsome men. If you have any idea of marriage, select a large, plain man with blue eyes and light hair."

"I do not know such a person."

"Not yet, of course; that is, not well enough to marry him."

"It is not nice to speak of such things," said the young lady, primly. "And it is not nice also to speak with strange gentlemen who come out of the forest when one is doing penance. But I am a half American, you know. Perhaps that is what makes me so bad."

"Will you catch it for talking to me?"

"Oh yes. It is not allowed. It is most improper."

"Then I suppose I'd better leave." Anthony settled himself more comfortably upon the bench. "And yet there is nothing really wrong about it, is there? Why, it's done every day in my country. Besides, who's going to know?"

"The padre. I tell him everything."

"You girls down here have a pretty tough time of it; you are guarded pretty closely, aren't you?"

She gave him a puzzled look.

"I mean, you don't have any liberty. You don't go out alone, or let fellows take you to lunch, or to the matinee, or anything like that?"

Evidently the mere mention of such things was shocking. "Oh, senor," she cried, incredulously, "such terrible actions cannot be permitted even in your country. It is awful to think of!"

"Nonsense! It's done every day."

"Here it would not do at all. One's people know best about such things. One must be careful at all times. But you Americans are so wicked!"

"How does a fellow ever get acquainted with a girl down here? How does he get a chance to propose?"

But this frank questioning on so sacred a topic was a little more than the young lady was prepared to meet, and for the moment confusion held her tongue−tied.

"One's people attend to that, of course," she managed to say, at length, then changed the subject quickly.

"Do you live in Panama?" she asked.

"Yes. I work on the railroad, or will, in a few days."

"You are so young for such authority. It must be very difficult to manage railroads."

"Well—I won't have to run the whole works—at first. I'm beginning gradually, you know—one train at a time."

"That will be easier, of course. What did you say is your whole name?"

"Kirk Anthony."

"Keerk! It has a fonny sound, has it not?"

"I never noticed it. And yours?"

"Do you speak Spanish?" She regarded him curiously.

"Not a word."

"My name is Chiquita."

He repeated it after her. "It's pretty. What is your last name?"

"That is it. If I told you my first name, you could not use it; it would not be proper."

"It ought to be something like Ariel. That means 'spirit of the air and water,' I believe. Ariel Chiquita. No, they don't go together. What are you laughing at?"

"To see you scratch your neck."

Anthony became conscious of a growing sensation where the strange pod had dangled against his skin, and realized that he had been rubbing the spot for some time.

"You did not know it was the cow−nettle, eh?"

"You enjoy seeing me suffer," he said, patiently.

"You do not soffer," she retorted, mimicking his tone. "You only eetch! You wish me to sympathize."

"See here, Miss Chiquita, may I call on you?"

"Oh!" She lifted her brows in amazement. "Such ideas! Of a certainly not."

"Why?"

"You do not onderstand. Our young men do not do those things."

"Then I'll do whatever is customary—really I will, but—I'm awfully anxious to see you again—and—'

"I do not know you—My father—"

"I'll look up Mr. Chiquita and be introduced."

At this the young lady began to rock back and forth in an abandon of merriment. The idea, it seemed, was too utterly ridiculous for words. Her silvery laughter filled the glade and caused the jealous waterfall to cease its music.

"No, no," she said, finally. "It is impossible. Besides, I am doing penance. I can see no one. In the city I cannot even sit upon the balcony." She fetched a palpably counterfeit sigh, which ended in a titter.

Never had Kirk beheld such a quaintly mischievous, such a madly tantalizing creature.

"Say! You're not really going to marry that fellow!" he exclaimed, with considerable fervor.

She shrugged her shoulders wearily. "I suppose so. One cannot forever say no, and there are many reasons—"

"Oh, that's the limit. You'll go nutty, married to a chap you don't care for."

"But I am naughty, now."

"Not 'naughty'—nutty. You'll be perfectly miserable. There ought to be a law against it. Let me call and talk it over, at least. I know all about marriage—I've been around so many married people. Promise?"

"I cannot let you 'call,' as you say. Besides, for two weeks yet I must remain here alone with Stephanie." She regarded him mournfully. "Every day I must do my penance, and think of my sins, and—perhaps look for orchids."

He saw the light that flickered in the depths of her velvet eyes, and his heart pounded violently at the unspoken invitation.

"To−morrow?" he inquired, breathlessly. "Do you intend to hunt orchids to−morrow?"

Instead of answering she started to her feet with a little cry, and he did likewise. Back of them had sounded an exclamation—it was more like the snort of a wild animal than a spoken word—and there, ten feet away, stood a tall, copper−colored negress, her eyes blazing, her nostrils dilated, a look of utmost fury upon her face. She was fully as tall as Kirk, gaunt, hook−nosed, and ferocious. About her head was bound a gaudy Barbadian head−dress, its tips erect like startled ears, increasing the wildness of her appearance.

"Stephanie!" exclaimed the girl. "You frightened me."

The negress strode to her, speaking rapidly in Spanish, then turned upon Kirk.

"What do you want here?" she cried, menacingly. She had thrust her charge behind her and now pierced him with her eyes.

"Miss Chiquita—" he began, at which that young lady broke into another peal of silvery laughter and chattered to her servant. But her words, instead of placating the black woman, only added to her fury. She pointed with quivering hand to the path along the creek− bank and cried:

"Go! Go quick, you man!" Then to her charge: "You bad, BAD! Go to the house."

"Miss Chiquita hasn't done anything to make you huffy. I came out of the woods yonder and she was good enough to direct me to the road."

But Stephanie was not to be appeased. She stamped her flat foot and repeated her command in so savage a tone that Kirk perceived the uselessness of trying to explain. He looked appealingly at the girl, but she merely nodded her head and motioned him to be gone.

"Very well," he said, regretfully. "Thank you for your assistance, miss." He bowed to the little figure in blue with his best manner and took up his gun. "This way out! No crowding, please."

"Adios, Senor Antonio," came the girl's mischievous voice, and as he strode down the path he carried with him the memory of a perfect oval face smiling at him past the tragic figure of the Bajan woman. He went blindly, scarcely aware of the sun−mottled trail his feet were following, for his wits were a−flutter and his heart was leaping to some strange intoxication that grew with every instant.

It threatened to suffuse him, choke him, rob him of his senses; he wanted to cry out. Her name was Chiquita. He repeated it over and over in time to his steps. Was there ever such a beautiful name? Was there ever such a ravishing little wood−sprite? And her sweet, hesitating accent that rang in his ears! How could human tongue make such caressing music of the harshest language on the globe? She had called him "Senor Antonio," and invited him to come again to−morrow. Would he come? He doubted his ability to wait so long. Knowing that she agreed to the tryst, no power on earth could deter him.

What a day it had been! He had started out in the morning, vaguely hoping to divert his mind with some of those trite little happenings that for lack of a better term we call adventures in this humdrum world. And then, with the miraculous, unbelievable luck of youth, he had stumbled plump into the middle of the most wondrous adventure it was possible to conceive. And yet this wasn't adventure, after all—it was something bigger, finer, more precious. With a suddenness that was blinding he realized that he was in love! Yes, that was it, beyond the shadow of a doubt. This mischief−ridden, foreign−born little creature was the one and only woman in the world for whom the fates had made him and brought him across two oceans.

That evening he sat for a long time alone on the gallery of his hotel, his spirit uplifted with the joy of it, a thousand whispering voices in his ears. And when at last he fell asleep it was to dream of an olive, oval face with eyes like black pansies.

XIV. THE PATH THAT LED NOWHERE

When "Senor Antonio" awoke the next morning he lay for an instant striving to recall what it was that had haunted his sleeping hours, what great event awaited him. Then, as it rushed through his mind, he leaped out of bed and dashed headlong into the bath− room. This was to−morrow! It had been ages in coming—he recalled how even his slumbers had dragged—but it was here at last, and he would see Chiquita.

He sang as he stepped under his shower, and whistled blithely as he dressed himself. What a glorious country this Panama was, anyhow! How good it was to be young and to be in love! He never had been so happy. A man must be in love to sing before breakfast. But the afternoon was still a long way off, and he must be content to dream until the hour came.

He was too early for the Cortlandts, and he breakfasted alone. When he strolled out upon the veranda for his smoke he found Allan waiting for him, as usual. The Jamaican had not missed a morning so far, and it was only by a show of downright firmness that Kirk had been able to get rid of him at any time during the day. The black boy seemed bent upon devoting his every waking hour to his hero, and now, finding himself regarded with friendly eyes, he expanded joyously.

"Got you some games yesterday?" he inquired.

"Yes. And I'm going again to−day."

"Plenty games over yonder is, but it is very fatiguing to get them. To−day I go along for showing you the way."

"Not a bit like it. I'm going alone."

"Oh no, boss!"

"Oh yes, boss! I accidentally shot the last man I hunted with— killed him." Kirk stared tragically at his companion, but Allan was not to be so easily deterred.

"I shall pahss behind you, boss."

"I'd love to have you, of course—but I'm too careless."

"Praise God, you must not go h'alone in that case, or something will befall you! I shall h'imitate the birds and call them out before you to fire at."

"Fire AT! I don't fire at things, I hit 'em."

"Yes, sar. In that case we shall procure plenty of games."

"See here! I'm going alone, understand? I have an engagement with a Naiad."

"'Ow much a month will you be getting for such h'engagements?"

"Naiads don't pay in money, they give you smiles and kind words."

"Better you continue then as train collector. There is great h'opportunity for stealing."

"My job won't be ready for a few days, and meanwhile I have become a huntsman. I intend to go out every afternoon."

"H'afternoons is no good for wild h'animals; they are sleeping. Walk they in the h'early morning, for the most part, very quietly."

"That's true of some wood creatures, but the kind I hunt dance along the edges of pools in the afternoon. Say, did you ever feel like dancing?"

"No, sar."

"Come around on the back porch and I'll teach you a buck−step. I feel too good to sit still."

But Allan refused this proffer firmly. Such frivolous conduct was beneath his dignity.

"I 'ave h'important things to disclose," he said, mysteriously.

"Indeed."

"Yes, sar. Last night I dreamed."

"You've got nothing on me; so did I."

"I am walking on the h'edge of the h'ocean when I h'encountered a whale—a 'uge whale."

"Swam ashore to rest, I suppose?"

"No, sar; he was dead. It was very vivid."

"Well, what has a vivid dead whale to do with me?"

"This!" Allan brought forth a sheet of paper, which he unfolded carefully. "There is the number—the 'fish number,' sar."

"Why, this is a Chinese lottery advertisement."

"I got it for the very purpose. It would pay us to h'invest some money on the 'fish number.'"

"Nonsense! I don't believe in dreams. You say yourself they are false."

"Never such a dream as this, boss. It was very vivid."

"I've got no money."

Allan folded the paper disconsolately and thrust it into his pocket. "It is fartunate h'indeed," said he, "that you will be working soon, Master h'Auntony. And those P. R. R. was very fartunate also for getting you to h'accept a position, very fartunate h'indeed."

"Do you think I will raise the standard of efficiency?"

"Most of those railroad persons are vile people. They threw me h'off the train with such violence that my joints are very stiff and h'inflamed. I should h'enjoy being boss over them for a while."

"Why don't you ask for a job?"

"I have decided to do so, and I am asking you now for an h'engagement as brakesman."

"I can't hire you. Go to the office."

"Probably there are h'already brakesmen on your train."

"I have no doubt."

"In that case I shall ride with you as private person."

"Ride back and forth every day?"

"Those are my h'expectations, sar."

"That costs money."

"You will be collector," remarked the negro, calmly. "I should like to see those train people h'expel me, in that case."

"Well! I can see trouble ahead for one of us," laughed Anthony. "They don't allow 'dead−heads.'"

But Allan replied with unshaken confidence: "Then you should secure for me a pahss."

Kirk found it extremely difficult to escape from his persistent shadow that afternoon, and he succeeded only after a display of armed resistance.

It was the hottest part of the day when he set out, gun on arm, yet he never thought of the discomfort. After skirting the city, he swung into the fine macadam road that had brought him home the night before, and much sooner than he expected he arrived at the little path that led into the forest. He knew that he was trespassing again, and the knowledge added to his delight. As quickly as possible he lost himself in the grateful shade and followed the stream−bank with beating heart. His head was full of vague hopes and plans. He meant to learn the true story of Miss Chiquita's penance and find some means of winning her away from that other lover, of whom he had already thought more than once. He determined to make his love known without delay and establish himself as a regular suitor.

As upon the previous day, he broke into the glade before he suspected its presence, to find the same golden light−beams flickering in the shadowed depths and to hear the little waterfall chuckling at his surprise. There was the tree from which she had called to him, yonder the bench where they had sat together.

Of course, he was too early—he wanted to be, in order not to miss an instant of her company, so he seated himself and dreamed about her. The minutes dragged, the jungle drowsed. An hour passed. A thousand fresh, earthy odors breathed around him, and he began to see all sorts of flowers hidden away in unsuspected places. From the sunlit meadows outside came a sound of grazing herds, the deep woods faintly echoed the harsh calls of tropic birds, but at the pool itself a sleepy silence brooded.

Once a chattering squirrel came bravely rustling through the branches to the very edge of the enchanted bower, but he only sat and stared a moment in seeming admiration, then retreated quietly. A yellow−beaked toucan, in a flash of red and black and gold, settled upon a mirrored limb; but it, too, stilled its raucous tongue and flitted away on noiseless pinions as if the Naiads were asleep.

In the moist earth beside the bench Anthony saw the print of a dainty boot, no longer than his palm, and he promptly fell into a rhapsody. What tiny hands and feet she had, to be sure, and such a sweetly melancholy face!

Yet she was anything but grave and gloomy. Why, the sunlight dancing on that waterfall was no more mischievous and merry than she. The slight suggestion of sadness she conveyed was but the shadow of the tropic mystery or the afterglow of the tragedy that had played so large a part in this country's history. The fact that she was half American perhaps accounted for her daring, yet, whatever the other strain, it could not be ignoble. Mrs. Cortlandt's figure of the silver threads in a rotting altar−cloth recurred to him with peculiar force.

But why didn't she come? A sudden apprehension overtook him, which grew and grew as the afternoon wore away.

It was a very miserable young man who wandered out through the fragrant path, as the first evening shadows settled, and bent his dejected steps toward the city. Evidently something had occurred to prevent her keeping her tryst, but he determined to return on the morrow, and then if she did not come to follow that other path right up to the house, where he would risk everything for a word with her. He wondered if she had stayed away purposely to test him, and the thought gave him a thrill. If so, she would soon learn that he was in earnest; she would find him waiting there every afternoon and—after all, why confine himself to the afternoon when she was just as likely to appear in the morning? He resolved to go hunting earlier hereafter, and give the whole day to it. Meanwhile, he would make cautious inquiries.

It was considerably after dark when he reached the hotel, and his friends had dined; but he encountered Mr. Cortlandt later. If Edith's husband suspected anything of what had occurred a night or two ago, his countenance gave no sign of it. For some reason or other, Kirk had not been troubled in the slightest by the thought that Cortlandt might be told. He could not imagine Edith making him the confidant of her outraged feelings. Besides, would such a strangely impassive person resent any little indiscretion in which his wife might choose to indulge? Kirk did not know—the man was a puzzle to him.

Cortlandt's voice was thoroughly non−committal as he inquired:

"Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"I've been hunting, to kill time."

"Any luck?"

"No, none at all. I started too late, I guess."

"By−the−way," continued the other, "your friend Allan has been besieging Edith, imploring her to use her influence to get him a position. He has set his heart upon going to work with you."

"He is becoming a positive nuisance. I can't get rid of him."

"I never saw such hero−worship."

"Oh, all niggers are hysterical."

"Let me give you a bit of advice, Anthony. Remember there are no 'niggers' and 'whites' in this country—they are both about equal. The President of the republic is a black man, and a very good one, too."

"That reminds me. I hear he is to be succeeded by the father of my friend, Alfarez."

Cortlandt hesitated. "General Alfarez is a candidate. He is a very strong man, but—"

"I am glad there is a 'but.'"

"It isn't settled, by any means. The successful candidate will need the support of our government."

"I suppose the Alfarez family is one of the first settlers— Mayflower stock?"

"Oh, worse than that. The name runs back to Balboa's time. General Alfarez is very rich, and very proud of his ancestry. That is one thing that makes him so strong with the people."

"What are some of the other leading families?" Kirk artfully inquired.

"There are a number. The Martinezes, the Moras, the Garavels—I couldn't name them all. They are very fine people, too."

"Do you know the Chiquitas?"

Cortlandt's face relaxed in an involuntary smile.

"There is no such family. Who has been teaching you Spanish?"

"Really, isn't there?"

"'Chiquita' means 'very small,' 'little one,' 'little girl,' or something like that. It's not a family name, it's a term of endearment, usually."

Kirk remembered now how the girl's eyes had danced when she asked him if he spoke her language. It was just like her to tease him, and yet what a pretty way to conceal her identity!

"What made you take it for a proper name?"

"A−a little girl told me."

"Oh, naturally. All children are 'Chiquitas' or 'Chiquitos'— everything, in fact, that is a pet."

Kirk felt somewhat uncomfortable under the older man's gaze of quiet amusement.

"But these other families," he went on in some confusion—"I mean the ones like those you just mentioned—they sometimes intermarry with Americans, don't they?"

"No, not the better class. There have been a few instances, I believe, but for the most part they keep to themselves."

"How would a fellow set about meeting the nice people."

"He wouldn't. He would probably live here indefinitely and never see the inside of a Panamanian house."

"But there must be some way," the young man exclaimed in desperation. "There must be dances, parties—"

"Of course, but Americans are not invited. The men are easy to get acquainted with, charming, courteous, gentlemanly, but I dare say you will leave Panama without so much as meeting their wives or sisters. But why this consuming curiosity? Has some senorita struck your fancy?"

In spite of his effort to appear unconcerned, Kirk felt that he looked abominably self−conscious. Without waiting for a reply, Cortlandt continued to give him information as if he enjoyed it.

"I suppose one reason why so few Americans marry Panamanians is that our men like at least to get acquainted with their brides before marriage, and that is impossible in this country. A man never sees a girl alone, you know. When he calls to court her he wooes the whole family, who vote on him, so to speak. That doesn't appeal to us who originated the mother−in−law joke. There aren't many Northern chaps who would consent to select a wife by pointing her out like a bolt of calico on a top shelf."

Kirk suddenly realized to the full how egregious his request to call must have appeared to the Spanish girl. What a fool he had been, to be sure! For a moment he lost himself in a contemplation of the difficulties so unexpectedly presented. He was brought to himself by the words:

"—to−morrow you will go to work."

"What's that?" he broke forth in a panic. "I can't go to work to− morrow; I'm going hunting."

Cortlandt eyed him curiously.

"I didn't say to−morrow. I said Runnells 'phoned that he would be ready for you day after to−morrow. What is the matter with you? Have you lost your head over shooting, or don't you care to work?"

"Oh, neither," he said, hastily. "I merely misunderstood you. Of course, the sooner the better."

"Yes, as you say, the sooner the better," said Cortlandt, with a shade of meaning. "Well, good−night, and good−luck to you in your shooting!"

It was with much less self−assurance that Kirk set out again on the next morning, for this was his last day of grace, and he realized that unless he accomplished something definite it might be a considerable time before he could continue his quest. In view of what the girl had said regarding her engagement, delays seemed particularly dangerous.

He haunted the vicinity of the meeting−place all the morning, but no one came, and a heavy shower at midday drove him into the palm− thatched hut for shelter. When it had passed he put an end to his indecision and boldly took the other path. At least he would find out where she lived and who she was. But once again he was disappointed. The trail led out through the grove to the rain− drenched pasture, where it disappeared, and, instead of one house, he saw three, half hidden in foliage and all facing in the opposite direction. They stood upon the crest of a hill fronting the road, and he realized that the pool might be the bathing−place for the inmates of one or all of them.

Up past the grazing stock he went and around to the front of the nearest residence, which proved to be a low, rambling, bungalow affair with many outhouses smothered in a profusion of vines and fruit−trees. Evidently it was unoccupied, for heavy wooden shutters barricaded the windows, and no one answered his knock, although some pigeons perched upon the tile roof cooed at him in a friendly manner. He struck across lots to the next house, but met with no better success, and he approached the third dwelling with a certain hesitation, for it was his last chance. It was more pretentious than the rest, and stood proudly upon the highest point of the ridge, up which ran a private road guarded by twin rows of stately royal palms, whose perfectly rounded trunks seemed to have been turned upon some giant lathe. The house itself was large, square, and double−galleried. It was shaded by

lofty hard− wood trees and overlooked a sort of formal garden, now badly in need of care. The road was of shell, and where it entered the grounds passed through a huge iron gate suspended upon concrete pillars. The whole place had an air of wealth and exclusiveness.

Here, too, the windows stared at him blindly, and he saw no evidence of occupation; yet he advanced and pounded vigorously on the door. Failing to rouse any one, he paused to take a general view of the surroundings. Scattered upon every side were other winter homes, some bleaching nakedly in the open, others peeping out from luxuriant groves, some mean and poor, others really beautiful and impressive. He knew that he was in the heart of Panama's exclusive winter colony, where her wealthy residents came to avoid the heat.

Unwilling to acknowledge himself beaten, he plodded from one place to another, calling at all the nearest houses, finding most of them locked, and begging a glass of water where he chanced to be more fortunate. Nowhere did he see the girl or the Barbadian woman, nowhere did he receive an intelligible answer to his questions. The caretakers looked upon him with suspicion, and made it known that he was unwelcome, while their women retreated at sight of him. Even the children were unfriendly. Once, indeed, he heard the name that had been ringing so steadily in his ears, and it gave him a wild thrill until he discovered that it was only a negress calling to her child. Afterward it seemed that he heard it everywhere. On his disconsolate journey home it was spoken twenty times, being applied indifferently to dogs, cats, parrots, and naked youngsters, each mention causing him to start and listen.

Whether the girl had been playing with him, or whether she had been prevented from keeping her word, was of little moment now. He loved her and he intended to have her! He shut his teeth grimly and made a vow to find her if he had to invade every home in Las Savannas, or pull apart the walls of Panama.

XV. ALIAS JEFFERSON LOCKE

It was fortunate for Kirk, on the whole, that his last expedition had proved a failure, for his methods were none of the most discreet; and it was as well, perhaps, that his work on the railroad intervened to prevent further wild incursions.

He was detailed to ride No. 2, which left Panama at 6.35, returning on No. 7, which arrived at 7.00 P.M. For a few days he made the run in company with the train collector, whose position he was destined to fill; and, as the duties were by no means difficult, he quickly mastered them. He had quarters assigned to him, and regretfully took leave of his luxurious room and bath at the Tivoli. He also donned cap and linen uniform, and became an insignificant, brass−tagged unit in the army of Canal workers. Ordinarily he would have resented this loss of individuality, but the novelty of the thing appealed to him, and he brought a great good−nature to his work, deriving sufficient amusement from it to prevent it from growing tiresome.

For a time it offended his fastidious taste to be forced to elbow his way through superheated coaches jammed with shrieking, cackling, incoherent negroes. They were all utterly hysterical, and apparently possessed but one stubborn idea—to refuse payments of fares. But in time he grew to enjoy even this.

He was glad of his new−found independence, moreover, for, though it did not cancel his obligation to the Cortlandts, it made him feel it less keenly. As for his quarters, they were quite tolerable—about the same as he had had at boarding−school, he reflected, and the meals were better. They were not quite up to Sherry's or Martin's, it was true, but they cost only thirty cents, and that had advantages. Certainly he could not complain of a lack of incident in his new life. On his first trip to Colon and back he had nine disputes and two fights, and threw one man off—a record achievement, he was told, for a beginner.

A further diversion was furnished by Allan, who appeared early in the morning and all but assaulted the gateman, who refused to let him pass without a ticket. It took the entire station force to prevent him from starting for Colon as Kirk's guest. He considered it a matter of course that his friend should offer him the courtesies of the road, and he went away at last, wofully disappointed but not discouraged.

On the evening of that eventful day, instead of returning to his new quarters, Kirk proceeded to walk the streets in search of a certain face. He strolled through the plazas; he idled in front of the most pretentious residences; he tramped wearily back and forth through dim−lit, narrow streets, gazing up at windows and balconies, harkening for the tone of a voice or the sound of a girl's laughter. But he was without the slightest success, and it was very late when he finally retired, to dream, as usual, of Chiquita.

Several days passed, and he began to feel a little dull. He was making no progress in his quest, and he did feel the lack of congenial society. Then one evening there came a note from Edith Cortlandt briefly requesting him to come and see her.

He was a little surprised, yet he was conscious of a certain relief. He had not felt like intruding upon her with further explanations and apologies; but since she wished him to come— perhaps they could meet, after all, in a natural way. He wanted to get rid of the wretched misunderstanding that lay between them. If he were to leave the country that night never to return, he would want to feel that he had parted on good terms with the woman who had befriended him.

Promptly at eight o'clock he presented himself.

"I'm a laboring man now," he said, as he stood before her, "and I usually hold my cap in my hand and shuffle my feet when talking to ladies. Pray excuse my embarrassment."

She did not respond to the lightness of his tone. Her glance seemed intended to warn him that she meant to be serious.

"I suppose you are wondering why I sent for you," she remarked, after a perceptible interval, and Kirk felt instantly that their old relations could not at once be resumed. "I have discovered something very important, and I felt that you ought to know."

"Thank you," said Kirk, humbly. "It was very kind."

"You see," she went on, with a certain hesitancy, "you confided your story to me so frankly I felt under a certain obligation." She made a little dramatic pause. "I've discovered who Jefferson Locke is!"

"No! Who is he?" Kirk was instantly all attention, for the announcement came as something of a shock. He had almost forgotten Locke.

"His real name is Frank Wellar, and he is an absconder. He was a broker's clerk in St. Louis, and he made off with something like eighty thousand dollars in cash."

"Good heavens!" said Anthony. "How did you find out?"

"A bundle of New York papers—they came to−day."

"Where did they catch him?"

"They haven't caught him. He has disappeared completely—that's the strangest part of it. Your detective didn't die, after all."

"He recovered, did he? I'm mighty glad of that."

"Yes, but you aren't out of the woods yet. I can't understand why the police haven't discovered your whereabouts. You left New York openly under the name of Locke—"

"Perhaps it was so easy they overlooked it." He smiled ruefully. I'd hate to be arrested just now when I'm getting to be such a good conductor."

"Don't worry about that until the time comes. I'll get you the papers later." She showed no immediate intention of rising, however, but sat regarding her visitor with slightly heightened color. He began to feel embarrassed. It seemed to be his fate to receive benefits at this woman's hand, whether he willed it or not.

He got to his feet with an effort, and said, looking down upon her:

"I must go now; but first I want to make you feel how grateful I am for your kindness and for your continued trust in me. I haven't deserved it, I know, but—" He turned as if to leave, but faced her again as he heard her pronounce his name. He was surprised to see that there were tears in her eyes.

"Kirk," she said, "you're an awfully good sort, and I can't stay angry with you. Do you know you've made it rather hard for me staying away all this time?"

"I thought you never wanted to see me again."

"You shouldn't take so seriously what a woman says under such circumstances. It's embarrassing. It makes things seem worse than they are." She hesitated, as if to emphasize the difficulty of such candor.

Kirk said, gently:

"Does that mean that we can forget all about it and be good friends again? Does it mean that you'll forgive me?"

"I can't quite promise that," she answered. "But there is no need of your avoiding me; and it's absurd for you to feel as you do, that you can't accept any little services from me that might help you in your work. I'm still interested in your success."

"You're tremendously good," he answered, really touched. "I can't say anything, except that I'll try to be worthy of your kindness."

She gave him a half−distressed look, then smiled brightly.

"We won't talk of it any more," she said—"ever. Now do sit down and tell me what you have been doing all this time. How have you been getting along with your work?"

"All right, except one morning when I overslept."

"Overslept? Oh, Kirk!" she said, reproachfully.

"You see, I never got up so early before, except to go duck− hunting, and this is different. Did you ever try rising at five− thirty—in the morning, I mean? You've no idea how it feels. Why, it's hardly light! You can't see to brush your teeth! I suggested to Runnels that we send No. 2 out at eight−thirty instead of six− thirty—that's early enough for anybody—but he didn't seem to take kindly to the thought."

"What did he say when you reported?"

"I didn't consider it proper to listen to all he said, so I retired gracefully. From what I did hear, however, I gathered that he was vaguely offended at something. I tried to explain that I had been out late, but it didn't go."

Edith laughed. "Perhaps I'd better telephone him."

"Oh no, you needn't do that."

"But surely you were called in time?"

"Please don't. That's the first thing Runnels yodelled at me when I showed up. He's a nice fellow, but he's too serious; he lets little things bother him. He'll cool off eventually."

Time passed quickly in such an interchange of pleasant trivialities, and, although Kirk felt that he was making an unconscionably long call, he could not well leave while his hostess seemed bent on detaining him. It was late when he said good−night, and, after returning to his quarters, with characteristic perversity he proceeded to sit up, smoking cigarette after cigarette, while he tried to set his thoughts in order. He was grateful to Mrs. Cortlandt, and immensely pleased to learn that the man injured in the affair in New York had not died. But something must be done about Chiquita. That was the important thing now. He wrestled with the problem for a long time in vain. He was afraid to go to bed for fear of oversleeping again, and decided to stay up until train−time. But at length drowsiness overcame him, and for the few remaining hours he dreamed lonesomely of an oval face and big, black, velvet eyes.

He did not really miss his rest until the next afternoon, when the heat and the monotonous rumble of the train, together with its restful swaying, sent him off into a delicious doze, from which he was awakened by a brakeman barely in time to escape discovery. Thereafter he maintained more regular habits, and while no one but the luxury−loving youth himself knew what effort it required to cut short his slumbers in their sweetest part, he never missed his train, and in time the early hours ceased to be a hardship.

In the days that followed he tried his very best to make good. Every evening he had to himself he spent in search of the Spanish girl. Aside from his inability to find her, and an occasional moment of misgiving at the thought of Frank Wellar, alias Jefferson Locke, Kirk had but one worry, and that was caused by Allan. Never a day passed that the worshipful black boy did not fairly hound him with his attentions; never a nightly journey down into the city that Allan did not either accompany him or, failing permission to do so, follow him at a safe distance. For a time Anthony rebelled at this espionage, but the constant effort of refusal grew tiresome after a while, especially as the Jamaican did just as he pleased anyhow, and Kirk ended by letting him have his way. But this was not all. Allan insisted upon accompanying his friend upon his daily runs back and forth across the Isthmus. At first he succeeded in slipping past the gateman in some miraculous manner, and, once aboard the train, behaved as if free from all further responsibility. He made it plain, in fact, that he was Anthony's guest and boon companion, and considered the exchange of money quite unnecessary, if not even insulting. Day after day Kirk argued with him, even threatening to throw him off; but Allan ignored the arguments with bland good−nature and looked upon the threats as the display of an excruciating sense of humor. He continued to visit and to gossip on terms of the closest intimacy, and began, moreover, to exercise a certain proprietary right over Kirk, following him through the train to see that no harm befell him, and seizing the slightest opportunity to engage him in conversation.

Anthony explained time after time that there were probably spotters on the run, and that this conduct was sure, sooner or later, to get them both into trouble. To all of which Allan listened attentively and agreed with all earnestness. But the next morning invariably found him back again with some excuse.

"I can't h'explain it, chief," he acknowledged, on one occasion. "Every day swear I to cease, but it is of no h'avail. Ever you been in love with a female, sar?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"It is much the same. I can't h'allow you to leave me. I would die and kill myself, but—"

"Rats!"

"Yes, sar. It is very h'annoying, is it not?"

"Do you want me to lose my job?"

"Oh, MON!"

"I'm going to speak to the boss, if you don't let up. I don't want to get fired."

"Never mind you, for these h'engagements. I will work for you."

Becoming really concerned lest he should be accused of withholding fares, Kirk did speak to Runnels, explaining fully, whereupon a watch was set, with the result that on the very next morning Allan was chased out of the railroad yards by an unfeeling man with a club. Failing for a second time to evade the watchful eyes of the gateman, he ranged back and forth beyond the iron fence like a captive animal, raising his voice to heaven in weird complaint. He was waiting when the train pulled in that evening, glued to the iron bars, his eyes showing as white in the gloom as his expansive grin of welcome.

For several days this procedure was repeated with variations, until the dreadful threat of arrest put an end to it. Allan had conceived a wholesome respect for Spiggoty police, and for a few days thereafter Kirk was rid of him.

Then one morning he reappeared as usual in one of the forward coaches.

"How the deuce did you make it?" asked Anthony.

Allan proudly, triumphantly, displayed a ticket, exclaiming:

"It is of no h'avail to prevent me, boss!"

"That ticket is good only to Corozal, the first station. You'll have to get off there." But when Corozal had been passed he found Allan still comfortably ensconced in his seat.

"Now, boss, we shall have fine visits to−day," the negro predicted, warmly, and Kirk did not have the heart to eject him.

At the other end of the line Allan repeated the process, and thereafter worked diligently to amass sufficient money to buy tickets from Panama to Corozal and from Colon to Mt. Hope, relying with splendid faith upon his friend to protect him once he penetrated past the lynx−eyed gateman.

Runnels accepted Kirk's explanation, and so far exceeded his authority as to make no objection. Allan, therefore, managed to spend about half his time in company with the object of his adoration.

Although the Master of Transportation never referred to his conversation with Kirk on the occasion of their trip through Culebra Cut, he watched his new subordinate carefully and he felt his instinctive liking for him increase. The young fellow was in earnest, he decided, in his effort to succeed on his own merits, and had not been posing when he offered to start at the bottom. It gave Runnels pleasure to see how he attended to his work, once he had settled down to it.

Accordingly, it afforded him an unpleasant surprise when he received a printed letter from a St. Louis detective agency relative to one Frank Wellar, alias Jefferson Locke (last seen in New York City November 25th), and offering a substantial reward for information leading to his arrest. The communication reached Runnels through the usual channel, copies having been distributed to the heads of various departments. It was the description that caught his attention:

"White; age, twenty−eight years; occupation, clerk; eyes, bluish gray; hair, light, shading upon yellow; complexion, fair; height, six feet; weight, one hundred ninety pounds. No prominent scars or marks, so far as known, but very particular as to personal appearance, and considered a good athlete, having been captain of U. of K. football team."

There was but one man in Runnels' department whose appearance tallied with all this, and it gave the Master of Transportation a start to note how very complete was the identification. Nevertheless, he held the letter on his desk, and did nothing for a time except to question his new collector upon the first occasion. The result was not at all reassuring. A few days later, chancing to encounter John Weeks, on his way across the Isthmus, he recalled Kirk's mention of his first experience at Colon. By way of an experiment he led on the consul to speak of his former guest.

"Anthony? Oh yes," wheezed the fat man. "I see you've got him at work."

"You and he are friends, I believe. I thought you'd be interested to know he's getting on well. In fact, he's the best collector I have."

"We're hardly friends," said the consul, cautiously. "I suppose he's all right—must be or Cortlandt wouldn't have taken him up; but there's something about him I don't understand. Either he's on the level, or he's got the nerve of a burglar."

"How so?"

"Well, I know he isn't what he claims to be—I have proof. He's no more Darwin K. Anthony's son than—"

"Darwin K. Anthony!" exclaimed the railroad man, in amazement. "Did he claim that?"

"He did, and he—" The speaker checked himself with admirable diplomatic caution. "Say, he's taught me one thing, and that is that it doesn't pay to butt into other people's business. I played him to lose, and he won; and I got into a fine mess over it." Weeks wrinkled his face into a ludicrous expression of mournful disgust. "I couldn't pick a winner if there were two horses in the race and one of them had a broken leg. Whether his name is Anthony or Locke makes no difference to me. I got in 'Dutch' for meddling, and Alfarez lost his job for arresting him. It's only a damn fool who gets stung twice in the same spot. I'm through."

"You'll get your money. Anthony told me he'd square up on pay− day."

Weeks snorted at this. "Why, I've got it already. I've been paid. Mrs. Cortlandt sent me her check." He stared at his companion curiously. "Funny, isn't it, how I got called down and Ramen Alfarez got fired on his account?

What does it mean?" He winked one red eye in a manner that set Runnels to thinking deeply.

XVI. "8838"

For a few days after this conversation the Master of Transportation was in doubt as to what course he should pursue. In the end he did nothing, and the letter from St. Louis was permanently filed away. There were several reasons for this action. For one thing, he was a salaried man, and could not afford to lose his job. What influenced him most, however, was his genuine liking for Anthony. He could not bring himself to attach much weight to the suspicious circumstances connected with him. Being a man of sufficient courage to back his own judgment, he decided that no matter what might have been the past of Frank Wellar, alias Jefferson Locke, Kirk Anthony was entitled to another chance.

The first thing Kirk did when pay−day came was to enclose the greater part of his salary in an envelope and send it to John Weeks, with a note explaining that he had withheld only enough for his own actual needs, and promising to continue reducing his indebtedness by a like amount monthly. He was surprised beyond measure to have the remittance promptly returned. The brief letter that accompanied it brought him a flush of discomfort. What the deuce had made Mrs. Cortlandt do that? For a time he was undecided whether to be offended at her conduct or gratified, and he had not settled the matter to his satisfaction when he called upon her that evening.

"Weeks wrote me you had squared my account with him," he said, awkwardly. "I'm tremendously obliged, of course, and—I'll give this to you instead of him." He offered her the envelope with his pay enclosed.

"Don't be silly, Kirk," she said, in a matter−of−fact tone. "I didn't wish Weeks to have any opportunity to talk. You need this money and I don't."

"Perhaps I should have offered it to Mr. Cortlandt."

"Stephen knows nothing about the Weeks affair. If you choose to regard my little favor as a debt, however, please let it run on until you are better able to pay."

But Anthony remained inflexible, and at last she accepted his proffer with some impatience.

"You are the most foolish person I ever knew," she remarked. "Can't you understand that such obligations don't exist between friends? A few dollars mean nothing."

"A few dollars mean a good deal to me just now."

"You have the most disappointing way of receiving favors. I had a decent position for you, but you would go to collecting fares. I hope you have had enough of it by now, and are ready to take something worth while."

"Not until it comes naturally. No hop−skip−and−jump for mine."

Edith sighed. "It is terribly dull for me here at present," she said. "Mr. Cortlandt is very busy; I have no one to talk to; no one to amuse me. Why, I've scarcely seen you since you went to work."

"It is flattering to be missed."

"Will you come to the dance to−morrow night?"

He shook his head.

"The music is good; you will meet some nice people. If you remember, one of your qualifications for a position was that you are a good waltzer."

"I can't mingle with the 'quality.'"

"Be sensible. This is an invitation."

"I am getting sensible fast. I've learned something about Canal conditions. What would people say if Mrs. Stephen Cortlandt were seen dancing with the new collector of No. 2?"

"My dear boy, do you suppose Mrs. Stephen Cortlandt cares what these people say?"

"Mr. Stephen Cortlandt might."

"Mr. Stephen Cortlandt isn't snobbish, either."

"One has to be on the Canal Zone. Besides, to tell the sordid truth, I haven't any clothes."

Edith silently extended the envelope in her hand; but he laughed.

"Perhaps I'll come to the next dance. I'll be rich then. See!" He showed her a long slip of paper consisting of five coupons, each numbered "8838."

"Lottery tickets!"

He nodded. "Allan had a very particular dream about the number eight, so I invested five dollars 'silver' on his

hunch. You know he has the most wonderful dreams. There was one about a whale—it was appallingly vivid."

"But you don't bet on all these miraculous whales and things?"

"Oh no. The whale was a little too much for me. But I thought I'd take a chance on the number eight, it didn't seem quite so apocryphal."

"But why did you select such a ridiculous combination? It isn't likely that the eight will come out three times in four."

"It's the number of my automobile license." Kirk sighed at the memory of his new French car. "You don't object to such gambling?"

"Hardly," laughed Edith, "when I have a ticket for the same drawing. Every one does it, you know."

"If I win the capital prize I'll come to the next party and claim all the dances you will allow me."

"Not much encouragement in that for a lonely lady."

"Oh, I'm the luckiest chap in the world. The drawing comes off next Sunday, and it happens that I've been shifted to No. 6 for a few trips, so I'll have a chance to see the fun."

"If you were a little less quixotic and weren't so remarkably afraid of getting more than your deserts, you could come to all these dances."

"I'm sorry," he acknowledged, "but I have to do things in my own way."

It was a welcome change for him to sleep as late as he wished on Sunday morning, and he enjoyed the privilege to the full. Inasmuch as No. 6 did not leave until one o'clock, he had ample time in which to witness the lottery drawing, a thing he had been curious to see since he had first heard of it. This form of gambling was well recognized, it seemed; not only the natives, but all classes of Canal Zone workers, engaged in it freely. On every street corner women sold tickets day after day, and, as the drawings were conducted under rigid government supervision, the lottery had come to be regarded as a sort of public institution, quite as reputable as an ordinary church raffle.

Allan, vastly excited, was of course waiting to accompany him, and, when Kirk had finished a leisurely breakfast, the two strolled idly down into the city.

"Oh, boss," exclaimed the negro, "I feel that we shall h'experience good−fartune to−day."

"Did you buy a ticket?"

"No, sar, I reinvested all my monies travelling on those railroad trains."

"Now see how foolish you are. If you'd stayed at home you might have bought the winning number to−day."

"I prefer to h'accompany you. But—I have been thinking to make you a proposition of partnership. Master h'Auntony. I will stay home and dream numbers which you can purchase with your salary. In that manner we shall certainly burst this lottery."

"Oh, I see! You'll sleep while I rustle the coin to play. What's your idea of a fair division of the profits?"

"It is sometimes exceedingly fatiguing to dream," said Allan, defensively. "Sometimes one wastes an entire day and has no success."

"That's merely a question of diet. I could make you dream your head off."

"But I do not desire the profits, however, for being partners with you. I would like you to have plenty of monies, that is all. I love you, sar."

"Don't! You embarrass me."

"It is true, chief, I would die and—"

"Yes, yes, kill yourself."

"I pray to God h'every day that some bad man will h'assault you in order that I may die for you." The Jamaican was growing excited, as usual when he dwelt upon this subject. "I would h'enjoy to shed my blood for you, sar. I would like to see it running—running— running—" He waved his arms wildly.

"Don't bleed to death."

"I wish to suffer and scream and groan, so that you will be knowing—"

"Never mind. I think I get the idea. But I'm not going to allow it, and I'm not going to allow you to dream—you sleep too much as it is. Besides, your dreams are no good. Look at that whale dream of yours, for instance."

"Oh, sar, the 'fish' number did not win, to be sure, but 'water' did."

"But you didn't dream about water, it was about fish, 'vivid' fish."

"I did not chance to think of the water," acknowledged Allan, "but there was the whale lying upon the h'edge of the h'ocean, h'all the time."

The drawing, which was for a capital prize of fifteen thousand dollars "silver," had drawn a larger crowd than usual, and when the two reached Cathedral Square they found the lottery building thronged to overflowing with the usual polyglot elements that make up these Latin−American gatherings—negroes, Indians, Panamanians, Spaniards, Americans—while in the Plaza itself other groups were waiting to hear the report.

By dint of considerable effort Kirk succeeded in working his way through the wide double doors, and, being much above the average height, he was able to get a good view of the proceedings. Upon a platform a group of ceremonious officials were gathered about a revolving wire cage, so arranged that it could be whirled rapidly upon its axis. Into it were put ten ivory spheres, resembling billiard−balls in size and appearance. When this had been done, the cage was closed, and a very badly frightened twelve−year−old girl was selected at random from the audience, then lifted to the stage, where it required the commands and entreaties of her excited parents to prevent her from dissolving in tears. At a word from the master of ceremonies the cage was spun until the ivory balls inside leaped and capered like captive squirrels. Then at another signal it was stopped. The door was opened and the little girl reached in a trembling hand and selected a sphere. It proved to be hollow, with two halves screwed together, and in full sight of the assembly it was opened, displaying a bit of paper inside.

"Ocho!" cried the announcer, and a card bearing the numeral "8" was raised. The paper was replaced inside the ivory ball, the ball itself was dropped into the wire cage, the door was closed, and once more the cage was spun.

Kirk was much interested in the scene, not from any faintest hope that he would draw a prize, but purely from the novel atmosphere and color of the thing. While his eyes were busiest, and just as the child prepared to draw another ball, he felt a clutch upon his arm, and, glancing down, beheld the glowing black eyes of Senor Ramon Alfarez fixed upon him.

Alfarez was dressed immaculately, this time in civilian's white linen, his ferocious little mustachios carefully pointed, his cheeks freshly shaven and talcumed, his slender feet encased in white canvas shoes. A wonderful Guayaquil hat, the creamy straws of which were no thicker than silk threads, crowned his sleek, raven locks. It must have cost a small fortune. He carried a dapper little cane, with which he tapped his former prisoner to attract his attention.

At sight of him Kirk drew down his brows and said, gruffly:

"Don't poke me with that umbrella."

He turned away, but again Alfarez touched him with the rattan.

"I will spik' wit' you, hombre," he said.

"If you keep jabbing me with that crutch I'll break it, and then you can't walk home."

Ramen jerked his head toward the square outside in an imperious fashion, and Kirk, curious to learn the cause of this unusual excitement, followed him without demur. When they had reached the street the Spaniard turned with flashing eyes and a mirthless smile.

"Well!" he said, dramatically.

"Pretty well. How goes it with you?"

"So! You 'ave socceed in your cowardly attemp'."

"My what?"

"I am lose my poseetion as Commandante of Police."

"You don't say so!" Kirk's face broke into a smile of real pleasure.

"Ha! Makes it you to laugh, then?" exclaimed the Panamanian, excitedly. "Per'aps you shall answer to those detestable actions, senor."

"Perhaps! I see you blame me for the loss of your job. Well, maybe you won't beat up the next American you get your hands on."

"Bot—I 'ave another poseetion!" Ramen exulted.

"Indeed! Are you 'behind the ribbons' at the local Wanamaker's?"

"I 'ave been promote! I am appoint' yesterday by his Excellency the Presidente to be his secretary. So! Those dastardly attack of yours is transpire to my blessing. It will be always so."

"I suppose it's a good job, but you ought to be selling poison in a drug−store. Did you call me out to hear this

news?"

"Si!" Alfarez nodded his head vigorously. Then, narrowing his eyes, he said, meaningly, in a voice that none might overhear, "Panama is sometimes very on'ealthy city for fat Americans." He ran a hostile glance up and down Anthony's burly frame. "It is the climate per'aps—of too great 'eat."

"In other words, you intend to make it hot for me, eh?"

"I?" The ex−commandant shrugged his shoulders in eloquent denial. "I shall do not'ing, bot—if you are wise man you will not display yourself to the dangers of these climate; you will return 'ome."

"Say! I've a good notion to punch your head."

Alfarez paled slightly.

"Soch would be most dangerous, for in Chiriqui prison there is at the present some fatal disease." He laughed sneeringly. "The senor is reech man's son, eh? Those do not geeve the appearance."

With supreme insolence he touched one of the buttons upon Kirk's linen uniform with his cane, whereat the American snatched the stick out of his hand, broke it, and tossed it into the street. His blood was up, and in another breath he would have struck the Spaniard, regardless of consequences, but just at that moment Allan, dashed out of the crowd crying, breathlessly:

"Oh, boss! Oh, BOSS! Glory to God, it is true! OH−H−H GLORY!" Seizing Kirk's hands, he kissed them before the other could prevent, then ran on frantically: "Come quick! Come! Come! Come!"

"Look out!" snapped Kirk, angrily. "What's happened?"

"The dream! The dream is come! Oh, God, sar! You—you have won the capital prize, sar!"

Alfarez's exclamation, as much as the boy's wild hysteria, brought Anthony to himself.

"NO! Honest, now! What's the number?" he exclaimed.

"H'eight, h'eight, three, h'eight," sobbed the Jamaican. Kirk made a dive for his coat−pocket, while Allan continued in a rising voice:

"Glory to God, sar! Glory to God! It is fifteen thousand dollars 'silver.' I thought I should h'expire from fright. Oh, I—Quick! Praise be—Do not say you have lost the ticket or I shall die and kill myself—"

"Here it is!" In his hand Anthony waved a slip of paper, out of which leaped four big, red numbers−"8838."

"Carraho!" came from behind him, and he turned to behold Alfarez, livid of face and with shaking hand, fling a handful of similar coupons after the broken cane. Without another word or a glance behind him, the Panamanian made off across the Plaza, barely in time to, escape the crowd that surged around the two he had quitted.

Bombarded by a fusillade of questions in a dozen tongues, jostled by a clamoring, curious throng, the lucky owner of 8838 fought his way back into the lottery building, and, as he went, the news spread like flaming oil.

There it was, plainly displayed, "8838"! There could be no possible mistake, and it meant fifteen thousand silver pesos, a princely fortune indeed for the collector of No. 2.

Promptly at five minutes to one o'clock that afternoon, Allan Allan, late of Jamaica, strode through the Panama railroad station and flaunted a first−class, round−trip ticket to Colon before the eyes of his enemy, the gateman. He was smoking a huge Jamaican cigar, and his pockets bulged with others. When he came to board the train, he called loudly for a porter to bring him the step and, once inside, selected a shady seat with the languid air of a bored globe−trotter. He patronized the "butcher" lavishly, crushing handful after handful of lemon−drops noisily between his teeth and strewing orange peel and cigar ashes on the floor with the careless unconcern that accords with firmly established financial eminence. He spat out of the window, he waved a dignified greeting to his countrymen gathered upon station platforms, he halted hurrying brakemen to inquire times of arrival and departure, and in general he had the time of his young life.

Only when Kirk appeared upon his rounds did he forego his haughty complacency. Then his wide lips, which nature had shaped to a perpetual grin, curled back as they were intended, his smile lit up the car, and he burst into loud laughter.

"Enjoying yourself?" inquired his hero.

"Passably, sar, passably!" Then, with a painful assumption of seriousness: "How is the train, sar, may I ahsk?"

"On time."

"Rarely it is so, as a general thing. It is fartunate h'indeed that you consented to run her this time."

"In a hurry to get to Colon?"

"Quite so. It is h'impartant that I h'arrive promptly to−day. I have business h'affairs." His countenance

assumed tortured lines as he endeavored to maintain his gravity, then failing in his attempt, he burst suddenly into a gale of merriment that sent forth a shower of peanuts and lemon candy. "Praise God, boss, we are 'appy gentlemen to−day, are we not?"

Kirk found that the report of his good−fortune had spread far and wide; he was halted a score of times for congratulations; operators at the various stations yelled at him and waved their hands; Runnels wired "Hurrah!" at Gatun. A certain respect was in these greetings, too, for he had suddenly become a character.

As yet, however, he had not fully considered what this windfall meant to him. His first thought had been that he could now discharge his debts, go back to New York, and clear himself before the law. Yet the more he thought of it the less eager he became to return. Seven thousand five hundred dollars in gold to Kirk Anthony, of Panama, Collector, was a substantial fortune. To Kirk Anthony, of Albany, Distributor, it was nothing. Suppose he went home and squared his account with the police, what would he do then? Nothing, as usual. Here, he was proving that the Anthony breed was self−supporting, at least. And there was another reason, the weightiest of all. Long before he had reached the end of his run he realized that not one hundred times the amount of this capital prize would tempt him to leave Panama before he had seen Chiquita.

Chiquita was beginning to seem like a dream. At times during the past week he had begun to wonder if she were not really a product of his own imagination. His fancy had played upon her so extravagantly that he feared he would not know her if ever they came face to face. His mental picture of her had lost all distinctness; her face was no longer clear−cut before his mind's eye, but so blurred and hazy that even to himself he could not describe her with any accuracy.

This was most unsatisfactory, and he reproached himself bitterly for the involuntary faithlessness that could allow her image to grow dim. He was almost without hope of seeing her again. And then, with the inconsequence of dreams and sprites, she appeared to him.

It was but a glimpse he had, and a tantalizing flash of recognition from her eyes. It happened in the dusk during the confusion that accompanied the arrival of No. 7 at Panama, and it came with a suddenness that stunned him. The station was jammed with a roaring flood of negroes, another crowd was forcing its way through the exits in the high iron fence, the street was a crush of Spiggoty coaches.

Kirk had volunteered to assist an old lady, and his arms were full of bundles as he guided her between the clicking teeth of a turnstile. He was helping her into a carriage when he heard the sharp clatter of hoofs upon the brick pavement, and looked up to see a fine Peruvian mare hitched to a tan−colored surrey skirting the confusion. A black coachman was driving, and there were several people in the carriage. Kirk cast it a casual glance, and just as he looked it swept into the glare of an electric light. Out from the back seat shone a perfect oval face, with soft, luminous eyes. It was just as he had pictured it, only more beautiful.

Kirk nearly upset his little old lady, who was struggling into her equipage. He swept his armful of bundles into the coach, seized his scandalized companion under the arms, and deposited her bodily upon a seat. Without waiting to hear from her, he dashed away through the bedlam. Under horses' heads he went, past flying hoofs and scraping wheels, jostling pedestrians, and little, brown policemen, until he had reached the outskirts of the crowd, where he vaulted into a vacant vehicle and called upon the driver to whip up.

"Quick! Quick! Follow that tan−colored surrey! I'll give you a dollar gold not to lose sight of it."

With the blandest of smiles the coachman started his horses, then, turning, he inquired, politely:

"'Otel Tivoli?"

"No, NO! Follow that carriage!"

"No sabe Ingles!" said the coachman.

Before Kirk had succeeded in making him understand, the street had become jammed with carriages and the Peruvian mare was lost to sight. After a half−hour of futile clattering back and forth, Kirk dismissed the driver.

But there was no doubt that she had recognized him, and nothing now could prevent him from continuing his search. The trouble was that his present occupation allowed him no opportunity. He was tied to the railroad except at night.

It was perhaps two weeks later that a serious shake−up occurred in the office force, of which no one seemed to know the cause. There was a mad scramble for advancement all along the line, in which Kirk took no part. But unexpectedly Runnels summoned him to his office.

"How would you like an inside position?" said the Master of Transportation, eying him keenly.

"So soon?"

"I said I'd advance you if you made good." He paused an instant, then said, deliberately, "When you get the hang of things here you'll have a chance to be my assistant."

Kirk opened his eyes in amazement.

"Gee! That's great! But do you think I can get away with it?"

"Not at once. It will take time, of course, and you'll have to work like the devil." Runnels regarded him curiously, recalling the letter so carefully filed away. Then he yielded to his natural impulse.

"Look here, Anthony," he said, "I'm partly selfish in this, for I believe you're the sort I'm going to want within the next year. The superintendent has had an offer from a big system in the States, and he's going to quit when his vacation comes. He likes me, and he says I'll probably step into his shoes. Do you understand what that means? I'll need fellows I can count on— fellows who won't double−cross me to make a dollar for themselves, or knife me when my back is turned. I've got to have an efficient, noiseless organization. Otherwise we'll all go under, for we'll be into politics up to our necks. I think you're my sort, so if you'll stick to me I'll help you, and for every step I take I'll drag you up one."

"It's a go!" The two young men clasped hands heartily. Runnels had struck the right note. Beside his former desire to prove himself a man, Kirk now felt a strong sense of loyalty to the one who had recognized his worth. This was no mere matter of promotion. He and Runnels would work shoulder to shoulder. A sense of responsibility descended upon him. For the first time he thoroughly understood the spirit of the ardent toilers who were giving their best to the Big Job. He was really one of them now, and the thought electrified him.

When he told his good news to Mrs. Cortlandt, her surprise was so cleverly simulated that he never dreamed that she had been at great pains to bring this thing about. Not that Runnels was indisposed to act upon his own initiative, but the circumstances that had made his action possible had been due to her. It was hard to help a man against his will; but she profited by experience, and took the line of least resistance.

The young man himself did not inquire too closely into the occasion of his advancement, and Edith Cortlandt was but little in his mind. He was consumed with the thought of Chiquita. He hoped that his new work would allow him more control of his time, and perhaps put him in the way of learning her name. He could move in better society now. Meanwhile he laid other plans. He took Allan into his confidence, and told him frankly that he was in love with a woman he did not know.

Of course his faithful follower was delighted, and made extravagant promises of aid.

"Now that the dry season has come," said Kirk, "people must be living at the Savannas, and I want you to haunt the region round that swimming−pool until you discover who she is. You must be my detective."

"Oh, boss, I would—"

"Don't tell me you'd die and kill yourself for me. I want you to live and find this girl for me. I'll take you out to−day, after office hours, and show you the place; then you'll have to do the rest. You talk Spanish, you know. But, above all, don't tip off."

"Tip h'off? What shall I be climbing, sar?"

"I mean you mustn't tell a soul."

"Never fear, boss. H'Allan will discover your female."

"And don't call her a 'female,' it sounds indecent. Remember, she has a Bajan with her, six feet tall, named Stephanie. Who knows? Maybe you can win Stephanie for yourself." Kirk chuckled at the thought.

"No, sar, if you please. Those Bajan 'oomen is all very disagreeable."

"You understand, I can't quit work to go looking for the girl, because I've simply got to tend to business. But I'll spend Sunday out there if you haven't already discovered her. Now, I'll chant this all over again on the way out, so you won't forget anything."

XVII. GARAVEL THE BANKER

These were busy days for the Cortlandts. They entertained constantly, and the occasions when they dined without from one to a dozen guests became so exceptional as to elicit remark around the hotel. Most of their efforts were devoted to certain Panamanians of the influential class, and in company with one or more of these Cortlandt made frequent trips to the various quarters of the Republic, sometimes absenting himself for days at a time.

During these intervals his wife assumed the direction of affairs, and continued to entertain or be entertained. Her energy and resource seemed inexhaustible. The officials of both governments treated her with punctilious respect, and the prestige gained in this way she used to enhance her reputation as a hostess. Soon she became the social dictator of the city, and the most exclusive circles, American and Panamanian alike, allowed her to assume control.

The result was just what had been designed. Tourists and visiting newspaper people spoke glowingly of the amity between the two nations, and wondered at the absence of that Spanish prejudice of which they had heard so much. Those who chanced to know the deeper significance of it all, and were aware of the smouldering resentment that lay in the Latin mind, commented admiringly upon her work, and wondered what effect it would have upon the coming election. Already this event had cast its shadow ahead, bringing memories of the last election with its disturbances and ragged uncertainty. That had been a pregnant epoch. Armed guards, hidden behind American walls, had listened to the growing clamor and prepared to fire. American marines had been held in readiness to take such action as might have convulsed the other watchful World Powers.

Since then the fuse had burned steadily, if slowly. As the time drew near, there were those who openly predicted trouble. Others scoffed at the idea, although they claimed that this would be the last election ever held in Panama. But all united in declaring that, whatever the work to which the Cortlandts had been assigned, they were doing it well.

No one but the woman herself and her husband really understood the tremendous difficulties of their task or the vital issues at stake. Although they seemed to be making progress, they knew that they were dealing with a people not only excitable and egotistic, but steeped in guile, and distrustful by nature. The fire was close to the magazine. But this was Edith Cortlandt's chosen field, and she brought to bear a manlike power of cool calculation, together with a brilliant intuition of her own. Never had her tact, her knowledge of human nature, her keen realization of political values been called into such play as now. So triumphantly did she exercise these qualities that all who came into contact with her recognized the master mind directing the campaign, and, consciously or unconsciously, relegated her husband to the background.

To the Latin intellect this display of power, on the part of a woman, was a revelation. She knew the effect she produced, and made the most of it.

Old Anibal Alfarez was, perhaps, the last fully to appreciate her. He did, however, learn in time that while he could successfully match his craft against that of the husband, the wife read him unerringly. The result was that he broke with them openly.

When news of this reached the members of the Canal Commission, they were alarmed, and Colonel Jolson felt it necessary to make known their views upon the situation. Accordingly, a few nights later, the Cortlandts dined at his handsome residence on the heights above Culebra. After their return to Panama, the Colonel, in whom was vested the supreme authority over his nation's interests, acknowledged that his acquaintance with diplomacy was as nothing compared with Edith Cortlandt's.

It was to Colonel Bland, in charge of the Atlantic Division, that he confessed:

"In all my life I never met a woman like her. Cortlandt, as you know, is a clever fellow, and I flatter myself that I'm no mental invalid; but we were like children in her hands. He sided with me at first, but she talked us both around in spite of ourselves. I agree with her now, perfectly, and I am content to let her have free rein."

"General Alfarez is the strongest man in the Republic," said Colonel Bland. "As Governor of Panama Province, he's the logical next President. Besides that, he has the machinery behind him. I don't see who there is to defeat him."

"We argued the same thing. She thinks Garavel is the proper man."

"Garavel is a banker; he's not a politician."

The chief−engineer laughed.

"All Spanish−Americans are politicians, Colonel; they can't help it."

"Would he accept?"

"It is her business to find out. I had my doubts."

"But could he win? It would be a calamity if he had American backing and failed; it would mean a disaster."

"Cortlandt has been working carefully, and he has been in all the seven Provinces. He admits that it might be done; and she is certain. You see, their part in the Colombian affair makes them strong with the leaders, and they have already whipped the foreign influences into line. Of course, it will mean a fight—Alfarez won't give up easily—but, if Garavel should be the next President, it would be a fine thing for both countries."

The other commissioner shook his white head doubtfully. "I supposed it was all settled; Cortlandt himself told me Alfarez was a good man the last time I talked with him. My God, it seems to me we've got enough on our hands without being guardians for a two− by−four republic filled with maniacs. We've got to finish this job on time. I can't understand this change of sentiment."

"Oh, it isn't settled. There is ample time for anything to happen. When the psychological moment comes, Cortlandt will be in position to swing his influence whichever way he thinks best."

"Well, it's a puzzling situation," Colonel Bland admitted. "And I wish it were over." Then he branched off on the subject of a cargo of cement which had not been up to standard and might have to be rejected.

Over at Panama the Cortlandts were looking for a house to lease. Affairs had reached a point where it seemed advisable to give up their quarters at the Tivoli and enter into closer contact with the life of the Spanish city. One reason for the move was the necessity for a greater privacy than the hotel afforded, for the time was not far distant when privacy might prove of paramount importance.

Meanwhile they gave a ceremonious little dinner, the one and only guest being Andres Garavel, the banker.

Of all the charming peoples of Central America there are, perhaps, none more polished and well−bred than the upper−class Panamanians. Of this agreeable type, Senor Garavel was an admirable example, having sprung from the finest Castilian stock, as a name running back through the pages of history to the earliest conquests attested. Other Garavels had played important parts in the troubled affairs of Guatemala, and it was the banker's proud boast that one of his ancestors had assisted Alvarado to christen the first capital of that country—the city of St. James the Gentleman—in 1524. The name had later figured prominently in Antigua, that Athens of the New World where the flower of Spanish America gathered. A later forebear had fled southward at the time of the disturbances incidental to the revolt of the colonies, but in his departure there had been no disgrace, and since that time the Garavels had worthily maintained the family traditions of dignity and honor.

The present bearer of the name was of distinguished appearance. He was swarthy of skin, his hair was snow−white, and he had stern, black eyes of great intelligence. In size he was not above the medium, but his manner fully made up for any deficiency of stature. He was courtly and deliberate, evincing a pride that sprang not only from good blood but from good deeds. His poise was that of a man with heavy responsibilities, for Andres Garavel was a careful banker and a rich one. He was widely travelled, well− informed, an agreeable talker, and the conversation at Mrs. Cortlandt's table did not lag.

"I am so disappointed that your daughter could not come," Edith told him for the second time. "I'm afraid she objects to our American informality."

"No, no, my dear lady," said their guest. "She admires American customs, as I do. We are progressive—we have travelled. In my home, in my private life, perhaps, I am Panamanian, but in my business and in my contact with other peoples I am as they are. It is the same with my daughter."

"When you Latins really become cosmopolitan you are more so than we Americans," Cortlandt acknowledged. "We assume foreign airs and customs that please us and forget to retain our own, while you—well, with Germans you are German, with Englishmen you are English, and yet you never forget to be Spaniards."

The banker smiled. "My daughter has had a wide education for a child. She has travelled, she speaks five languages—and yet, underneath it all she is a Garavel and hence a Panamanian. She is all I have, and my life is hers."

"When we are settled in our new house we hope to see something of you both."

"You have effected a lease of the Martinez home, I believe?"

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"As my own. You are indeed fortunate to secure so fine a place. I wish that in some way I might be of service to you."

"The wish is mutual," Cortlandt answered, meaningly, but Senor Garavel concealed any recognition of the tone by a formal bow, and the meal progressed with only the customary small talk to enliven it.

As soon as the three had adjourned to the Cortlandt's suite the host of the evening proceeded to approach the subject in his mind as directly as the circumstances permitted. Through a series of natural transitions the conversation was brought around to politics, and Garavel was adroitly sounded. But he displayed little interest, maintaining a reserve that baffled them. It was impossible to betray him into an expression of feeling favorable to their views. When at last he consented to show his awareness of the suggestion so constantly held out, he spoke with deliberate intention.

"General Alfarez is my respected friend," he said, with a quietness that intensified his meaning, "and I rejoice that he will be the next President of Panama."

"You, of course, know that there is opposition to him?"

"All Panama knows that."

"General Alfarez does not seem to be a friend of the United States."

"There are few who hold the views I do. He is a man of strong character, he has no commercial interests to influence him as I have, and so we differ. Yet I respect him—"

"It is precisely because of those views of yours that I wish to consult you," said Cortlandt, slowly. "In all the Republic there is no one so progressive as you. May I speak frankly?"

Garavel inclined his white head without removing his intense, dark eyes from the speaker.

"Don Anibal Alfarez can never be President of Panama!"

The banker made no visible movement, yet the effect of this positive declaration was almost like that of a blow. After a pause he said:

"May I tell him you said so?"

"If you wish, but I do not think you will."

The hearer let his eyes flit questioningly to Mrs. Cortlandt's face to find her smiling at him.

"Believe me, dear lady," he said, "I suspected that there were grave reasons for this interview, but as yet I am at sea. I am not a politician, you know. I shall have no voice in our political affairs."

"Of course we know that, Senor Garavel, and of course there are grave reasons why we wished to talk with you. As Stephen has said, General Alfarez cannot be President—"

"Madame," he said, coldly, "Panama is a republic. The voice of the people is supreme."

"Down in your heart do you really think so?" She was still smiling at him. "No! The United States is supreme."

"Ah! That day will come, perhaps—I have said so; I look forward to it as the best solution, but—"

"The day has come."

"Even so, Alfarez is an honorable man, a strong man, and the wealthiest man in our country. He is a politician—"

"But he is not a friend of our country."

"I am not so sure." Garavel frowned at his cigar for a moment, while the room became silent. "What has this to do with me, madame?" he asked, at last.

"Can't you guess?" The intensity of her look caused him to rise hurriedly and cast a quick glance from one to the other.

"You are also a rich man, a man of ability," said Cortlandt, quick to seize the momentary advantage. "Your name is second to none in all Central America. The next President must possess intelligence, honor, ability; he must be a friend of our people. There is no one better—"

"Impossible!" exclaimed the banker, in a strange voice. "*I*? No, no!"

"And why not? Have you never had political aspirations?"

"Of course. All men have dreams. I was Secretary of Finance under Amador, but the Garavels have never really been public men. Politics have been a curse to our house. My grandfather—"

"I know," broke in Mrs. Cortlandt. "But times have changed. Panama has seen her last revolution, and she needs a business man at her head. Presidents are not made now by rifle and sword, and the man with the machete must give way to the man with a capacity for handling big affairs. There will be no more swineherd Presidents like your Guatemalan countryman Corera, nor tyrants like Zelaya. Panama is a healthy country, with no national debt; she is growing, developing. She holds the gateway to the Western World, and her finances must be administered wisely. You, Mr. Garavel, are one of the few who are clear−headed enough to see that her destiny is linked with ours, and there is no one who can direct her so well as you."

"It is impossible!" repeated Garavel, his agitation growing more pronounced. "General Alfarez is my friend. His son will be my son."

"Ramon! Is Ramon engaged to your daughter?"

"Yes," exclaimed the banker, shortly. He began to pace the room.

"What difference would that make, if the young people love each other?"

"Certainly," Cortlandt agreed. "They are not children."

"As for love, Ramon loves, and—my daughter will love also, once she is married, for she is a Garavel."

"If Ramon isn't satisfactory to her, ought you to force her inclination?" Mrs. Cortlandt offered, eagerly. But the banker flung his arms aloft in a gesture of half−humorous despair.

"Oh−h! These young ladies!" he cried. "They do not know what they want. What pleases to−day, displeases to−morrow. It is 'Yes' and 'No,' 'Yes' and 'No,' until one must decide for them. That, after all, is best." He paused abruptly. "This comes upon me like a flood, my friends. I am swept away, and yet I—I will need to think seriously."

"Certainly."

"To an honorable man the salary will mean nothing. I have many affairs; I fear I cannot afford this sacrifice."

"Would you retire in favor of some one who could afford it?"

"Alfarez is honest."

"Alfarez cannot be President."

"It would require a great deal of money. I am considered a rich man, but I have discounted the future, and my enterprises—" He flung out his arms. "I have spread out. I must be careful. It is not alone MY money that I have invested."

"It will require very little money," said Cortlandt. "I have been from David to Darien, from Bocas to Colon and I know the public sentiment."

"Speaking of David," his wife added; "it was you who first projected the railroad to that point, Senor Garavel."

"Yes, I saw that it was needed. It would make Panama," he said, simply.

"Under your administration it can be built. Mr. Cortlandt can assure you of our government's earnest co−operation. That would not be the case if General Alfarez were elected. Perhaps the Colombian boundary can be settled. There also our influence might avail. Those two steps forward would make the name of Garavel as famous in Panama as it is in Guatemala."

"Those are important issues for any loyal Panamanian," he admitted.

"And you love your daughter—you say your life is, hers. Your honor would be hers also. Senorita Garavel would have no cause to regret her father's presidency."

"Oh, it is useless to argue," smiled the Spaniard. "I am weak. I am human. I am also patriotic, and I realize that our little country must look to your great one for its stimulus. Our life must be moulded after yours. For years I have dreamed of a railroad to David, which would some day form a link in the great system that will join the three Americas. I have pictured our inland jungles replaced with homes; a great traffic flowing from end to end of the Republic. But I have also seen that our people would not profit by it. The languor of the tropics is in their blood, and you Yankees would be needed to inspire them." His voice shook with emotion as he went on: "They are good, simple people, no more than children, and I love them. A gracious Providence gave us the key to the world's commerce, but we could not use it. It needs all our wisdom now to adapt ourselves to the conditions that have arisen. 'Andres Garavel, President of the Republic of Panama!' It has a sweet sound, my friends, and yet—I have fears."

"Let's take them one by one," laughed his host, "and prove them imaginary. I see a great good−fortune in store

for you."

It was midnight before Senor Andres Garavel, the banker, bade his friends good−bye. When he descended the hotel steps to his carriage, he held his white head proudly erect, and there was new dignity in his bearing. As he was whirled homeward behind his spirited Peruvian mare, a wonderful song was singing in his heart.

XVIII. THE SIEGE OF MARIA TORRES

The faithful Allan was not long in fulfilling his mission. Such devotion as his, it seemed, could hardly fail, and, if there had been a hundred Chiquitas, doubtless he would have corralled them all. He conveyed the impression that, if it had been necessary to journey beyond the grave and bring back the ghost of some dead−and−gone Chiquita, he would have gloriously succeeded. One morning, a few days later, he appeared to Kirk, bursting with importance and news.

"Well, sar! I have discovered your female," he announced, pompously.

"No? What's her name? Who is she?"

"Her is named Maria Torres, sar, and resides in the small 'ouse you h'observed upon the 'ill."

"Did you SEE her?" Anthony could hardly believe his ears.

"Oh yes, very h'extensively."

"What does she look like? Is she dark?"

"Very dark, sar."

"And small?"

"Not too small," opined Allan.

"Of course, just right. And her eyes, like—like—"

"H'ink! Spots of h'ink. Oh, it is she, Master h'Auntony."

"Jove! I believe it is! You're an ace, Allan. You're my ace of spades." Out of pure joy he began to pummel him playfully. "Why don't you rejoice? Lift up your voice and sing. Maria Torres! It's a heavenly name—Why don't you make a joyful noise?"

Allan voiced a feeble hurrah.

"It was only by chawnce that I h'encountered her, boss, for she is residing in the city. I h'ascertained all those facts—"

"Good! Find the street and number, quick! I'm going a−wooing! Say! When these Spaniards court a girl they hang around her window and roll their eyes, don't they? Me for that! I'll haunt the Torres neighborhood until she shows herself, or die in the attempt. I'll play their game. I'll get a guitar, I'll—Oh, from this moment I'm a Spaniard of the Spaniards. I'm the incarnation of ten thousand fiery cavaliers. I'll stand in front of her house until she sends me a chair. Maria Tor—What the deuce are you loafing for? Get a move on; hustle those kidney feet of yours. Don't come back until you have located her; for to−night—ah, blessed night! My life's romance begins in earnest. GET OUT!"

Allan fled while Kirk proceeded to dream over his breakfast of bacon and cold−storage eggs.

He was beaming when he appeared at the office. He sang, he whistled, he performed his duties with a joyous uproar that interfered seriously with all around him and set the whole place in confusion. Nor did his spirits lessen when, later in the day, Allan informed him that the residence of Senor Luis Torres, whom the gods had selected as father to the delectable Maria, was at number 89 Avenida Norte.

Anthony did not taste his dinner that evening. As darkness settled he planted himself conspicuously on the corner opposite No. 89 and began to study the premises.

It was a trifle disappointing to note that Chiquita lived in such poor style; the place was not at all impressive. The first floor of the building was given over to a Chinese bazaar, and the upper story seemed neither extremely clean nor at all modern. But, although this clashed a bit with his preconceived ideas, he knew that many of the nicest Panamanian families lived in modest quarters.

His natural impulse was to apply boldly at the door, but he had learned something of local customs, and he determined to give no possible ground for offence. After she had recognized him and seen his willingness to follow the habit of her Spanish suitors, it would be feasible, perhaps, to adopt a more Americanized method. Meanwhile, he must run no risk of antagonizing her people.

In the Central American scheme of courtship patience plays a large part. It is the young man's practice to martyr himself until the sight of him becomes such a reproach that the family must perforce express its sympathy. Although this procedure struck Anthony as ludicrous in the extreme, its novelty was not without charm, and he

had lived through such a period of torturing uncertainty that the mere fact of the girl's presence was compensation enough for his pains.

For an hour he stood motionless, staring at the upper windows of No. 89. Then his feet began to hurt, and he paraded slowly back and forth "playing the bear," as he had heard it termed. Another hour passed, and he discovered that, if his presence had not been marked by the members of the Torres household, it was at least exciting comment elsewhere in the neighborhood. Faces appeared at near−by windows; he heard sounds of muffled merriment which made him uncomfortable; passers−by smiled at him and dropped encouraging remarks which he could not translate. The little policeman, lounging at the next corner, watched him complacently and agreed with his neighbors that the Americano was undoubtedly a fine−appearing lover.

Kirk took his stand at last beneath a street light and gazed languorously upon the windows opposite until his eyes ached as well as his feet. At last a curtain parted, and he saw the flash of a white dress back of it. His heart leaped; he raised his hat; there was a titter from beyond the iron grating. Presently another figure was dimly revealed. The watcher held his position stubbornly until the last light in the Torres house winked out, then limped homeward, warmed by the glad conviction that at least he had been recognized.

Promptly at seven o'clock on the following evening he returned to his post, and before he had been there five minutes knew that his presence was noticed. This was encouraging, so he focused his mental powers in an effort to communicate telepathically with the object of his desires. But she seemed unattuned, and coyly refrained from showing her face. He undertook to loiter gracefully, knowing himself to be the target of many eyes, but found it extremely hard to refrain from sitting on the curb, a manifestly unromantic attitude for a love−lorn swain. He swore grimly that, if usage required a suitor to make an exhibition of himself before the entire neighborhood, he would do the job thoroughly. It did not cheer him to reflect that the girl had a keen sense of humor and must be laughing at him, yet he determined to put in a week at this idiotic love−making before he attempted anything else. Later in the evening he was rewarded by the glimpse of a handkerchief cautiously waved, and he was delirious with joy as he hobbled homeward.

Night after night he spent assiduously studying the cracks and blemishes in the stucco walls of No. 89 Avenida Norte, encouraged by the occasional flutter of a hand or a soulful sigh from behind the lace screen at the third window from the corner. But when Sunday came he was in no mood to continue this roundabout and embarrassing mode of courtship longer. He made an early start from his quarters, taking Allan with him.

"I'll catch her going to mass," he explained, hopefully. "I've just got to put an end to this performance."

"Will you h'accost her h'openly?" inquired Allan.

"You bet! If she runs away you trip her up. Oh, it's great to be in love!"

"Without doubt, sar."

"She's a corker, isn't she?"

"I do not know as to that," Allan demurred. "What may be a carker?"

"I mean she's beautiful."

"Oh, h'indeed so! And her h'eyes—like h'ink spots, as you say."

"Was she wearing a denim dress when you saw her?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly agreed the negro. "Oh, there is no mistake. It was a red dress."

"No, it wasn't. It was blue."

"H'exactly, sar—a sort of reddish blue."

"And she was—petite?"

"Rather more dark, I should say."

"I mean she was small."

"Oh, it is the same female. It is h'exciting, is it not?"

Kirk acknowledged that it was exciting, for, now that he had a full day in which to besiege No. 89, he felt certain of gaining a word at least with his inamorata. He was in good time, it seemed, for hardly had he taken his customary station before the Cathedral bells awoke the slumberous echoes of the city.

"Praise God, she will be coming soon!" Allan exclaimed. "I shall h'expire from fright. Look! There! THERE!"

Down the wide stairs leading from the living−rooms of Senor Torres came two women, and the negro danced in excitement. As they emerged upon the sidewalk the younger one flashed a glance at the men opposite, and Kirk saw that she was a mulatto—evidently a housemaid. His eager eyes flew back to the entrance. Allan hissed at

him:

"Yonder goes! Quick, or you will be losing she."

"Where?"

"There! The young female in w'ite. It is h'indeed the Senorita Torres."

"THAT!" Anthony stared at the girl amazedly as she cast him a second and more coquettish flash of her black eyes. "Why, damn it, that—why, she's a—NIGGER!"

"No, no!" shrilly expostulated the Jamaican. "It is she. H'alas! They have turned the corner."

Kirk wheeled upon his detective in overwhelming disgust. "You idiot!" he breathed. "That girl is a 'dinge.' So, SHE'S the one I've been—Oh, it's unspeakable! Let's get away from here."

"You h'informed me in particular that she is dark," protested Allan.

"Come on!" Kirk dragged his companion away as fast as he could. His thoughts were too deep for tears. As soon as his emotion permitted coherent speech, he launched into a tirade so eloquent and picturesque that Allan was reduced to a state of wondering awe. Pausing at length in his harangue, he turned smouldering eyes upon the black boy.

"I ought to punch you right in the nose," he said, with mournful calmness. "Let me feel your head." Allan obediently doffed his cap, and Kirk rapped the woolly cranium with his knuckle. "Do you feel that? Is there any sensation?"

"Yes, sar! Shortly I shall suffer a swelling." Allan stroked the spot tenderly.

"It's all imagination; there's no feeling to solid bone. You've got an ivory 'nut,' my friend, just like a cane."

"Ivory−nuts grow upon trees, sar, in the Darien region."

Anthony regarded him sourly. "The Brunswick−Balke people never turned out anything half so round and half so hard. That burr of yours is a curio. I told you Chiquita was small and beautiful and dainty and—Oh, what's the use! This dame is a truck−horse. She's the color of a saddle."

"Oh, she is not too dark, sar." Allan came loyally to the defence of Miss Torres. "Some of the finest people in Panama is blacker than that. There is but few who are h'all w'ite."

"Well, SHE'S all white, and I want you to find her to−day—TO−DAY, understand? You gallop out to the Savannas and make some inquiries." He shook his fist in Allan's face. "If you don't learn something this trip, I'll have your lignum−vitae cranium in a bowling−alley by dark. Lord! If I only spoke Spanish!"

Allan reluctantly departed, and Kirk went back to his quarters in high displeasure. It seemed as if the affair had actually left a bad taste in his mouth. He could not compose his features into anything like a decently amiable expression, but went about with a bitter smile upon his lips. Every time some new aspect of his grotesque and humiliating mistake occurred to him he suffered a nervous twinge. That afternoon a card was brought to him bearing the ornate inscription in a beautiful Spencerian hand:

PROFESSOR JESUS HERARA THE HERARA COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Reconciling himself as best he could to the prospect of an interview with some importunate stranger, he grudgingly consented to have the visitor brought in. Professor Herara was not alone. He was accompanied by a very short, very fat man, whose smooth skin had the rich, dark coloring of a nice, oily Cuban cigar.

"Senor Anthony, it is?" inquired the Professor, bowing ceremoniously.

"That's my name."

"It is my privilege to consult you upon a business of importance."

"I'm afraid you have the wrong party. I don't care to learn shorthand."

"Ah, no, it is not concerning my academy. Allow me to present Senor Luis Torres."

Kirk felt the room begin to revolve slowly.

"My friend does not possess a card at the moment, eh?" continued the Professor.

The little, rotund man bowed, his hand−polished, mahogany features widening in a smile.

"'Sveree hot wedder!" he exclaimed.

"He begs one thousand pardons for not speaking of your language the more perfectly, and so he is request of me to be his interpreter."

Something urged Kirk to flee while there was yet time, but the father of Maria Torres was between him and the door, and he could not bring himself to push the little man out of the way. So he bade them both be seated in the only two chairs which the room contained, while he rested gingerly upon the edge of the bed. The

new−comers let their eyes roll curiously about the chamber, and an embarrassing silence descended. Senor Torres maintained a set smile designed to be agreeable; Professor Herara, serene in the possession of his linguistic acquirements, displayed the insouciance of an undertaker. Together they beamed benignantly, almost patronizingly, upon the young man. Plainly they meant to put him at his ease—but they failed. At length, after clearing his throat impressively, the interpreter began again:

"Of course, you have been expecting this visit, senor?"

"N—not exactly."

"My friend is deeply disappointed that he has not the honor of before meeting you."

"I am flattered, but—"

"Indeed, yes! Then you are perhaps acquainted with Senor Torres by reputation? You know who he is?" Professor Jesus Herara raised his brows and inclined his head like a polite school−teacher endeavoring to encourage a diffident pupil.

"I regret that I do not."

"He is one of our most estimable citizens. He is possess' not only of the magnificent residence at No. 89 Avenida Norte, but also of a comfortable abode at Las Savannas, and he has a large trade in sponges and hides. His place of business you will have noticed upon the water−front, perhaps?"

Kirk wiped his brow nervously and cursed Allan.

"And now, as for you, senor?" The principal of the Herara College of Business awaited an answer with unctuous deference. Evidently attributing the young man's silence to modesty, he went on, helpfully: "Senor Torres has instituted inquiries, and ascertained your excellent position with the P. R. R., but he would know more, if soch is not disagreeable to you."

"Well—I—there isn't much to tell. It is my first job."

This was quickly put into Spanish, whereupon Mr. Torres nodded with vigor, as if this information were indeed gratifying—nay, splendid.

"It is agreeable to my friend to ascertain your industry, and I may say you are most highly spoke of at the railroad office. Therefore, Senor Torres affords you an invitation to call at his residence on Thursday evening."

"That's awfully—nice," gasped Anthony; "but—er—what's the idea?"

"Ah!" The interpreter beamed; Mr. Torres beamed. They combined to radiate a gentle effulgence which was most disquieting. "It is indeed pleasing to encounter a gentleman so truly modest, so possessed of delicacy; but I may say that Senor Torres is look with favor upon your suit. Of course"—he checked Kirk's hasty words—"it is not completely settle, by no means; the young lady is but partly won. However"—he winked one black eye reassuringly— "as friend of the family I bid you not to permit discouragement and despair."

Anthony broke out in desperation: "Hold on! Let me explain! There's been an awful mistake."

"Mistake?" The tone was blandly incredulous.

"Yes. I'm not in love with Miss Torres."

Professor Jesus Herara stared at the speaker as if his mastery of the English language was, after all, incomplete. Torres, seeing that he was missing something, interpolated a smiling inquiry; then, as his interpreter made the situation clear, his honeyed smile froze, his sparkling eyes opened in bewilderment. He stared about the room again, as if doubting that he had come to the right place.

"There's really a mistake," Kirk persisted. "I don't even know Miss Torres."

"Ah! Now I understand." The Professor was intensely relieved. "It is precisely for that purpose we arrived. Bueno! You admire from a distance, is it not so? You are struck with the lady's beauty; your heart is awakened. You are miserable. You pine away. You cannot find courage to speak. It is admirable, senor. We understand fully, and I, who know, assure you of her many virtues."

"No, it's nothing like that, either. I have no doubt Miss Torres is altogether charming, but—I—there's just a mistake, that's all. I'm not the least bit in love with her."

"But, senor! Is it not you who have stood beneath her window nightly? Is it not you who have laid siege to her these many days?" The speaker's eyes were glowing with anger as he turned to make his inquiry clear to the young lady's father.

Mr. Torres began to swell ominously.

"If you'll just let me explain. I'm in love with a young woman, true enough, but it doesn't happen to be Miss

Torres. I thought it was, but it isn't."

There was another vibrant exchange of words between the Spaniards.

"You were making sport, then, of my friend—"

"No, no! It's another person altogether."

"Who?"

"I don't know her name."

"WHAT?" Herara was about to burst forth when his friend nudged him and he was obliged to put this amazing declaration into Spanish. Senor Torres breathed heavily and exploded an oath.

"I met her in the country and made a mistake in the town houses," Kirk floundered on. "I never knew till this morning that I was on the wrong trail. It is all my fault. I thought the lady's name was Torres."

"Eh? So you love one whom you do not know? Incredible!"

"It does sound a little fishy."

"And it is a grave affront to my friend. How will the senorita understand?—she in whose breast is awakened already an answering thrills?"

"I'm mighty sorry. If you wish, I'll apologize in person to Miss Torres."

At this Herara cried out in horror; then, after a brief colloquy with the father, he rose stiffly, saying: "I offer no words from my friend. For the present he does not believe, nor do I. Inquiries will be institute, of that be assured. If you have deceived—if your intentions were not of the most honorable"—the head of the Herara Business College glared in a horrible manner— "you will have occasion to regret those foolish jokes."

Kirk tried to explain that his present regrets were ample for all time, but, bowing formally, the visitors withdrew, leaving him to revile anew the name of Allan Allan.

When the black boy returned, foot−sore but cheerful, his appearance was the signal for an outburst that left him disconsolate and bewildered. He apologized over and over for his little error, and tried to reinstate himself by announcing, with a confidence he was far from feeling, that this time he had identified the elusive Chiquita beyond the peradventure of a doubt. This welcome intelligence did much to make Kirk forget his wrath.

"What's her name?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Fermina, sar."

"Are you sure?"

"H'entirely. But it will not h'avail to be courting of those ladies, Master h'Auntony."

"Is there more than one?"

"Two of they—sisters—very rich. They h'occupy the 'ouse h'adjoining Senor Torres."

Allan spoke in a hushed voice, and shook his head as if to show the hopelessness of aspiring to such aristocracy. Surely Kirk knew of the Ferminas? Arcadio Fermina was the owner of the pearl− fishery concession and a person of the highest social distinction. He was white, all white, there was no doubt on that score. Undoubtedly Chiquita would prove to be his daughter and a joint heiress to his fabulous fortune. But she was not the sort to be courted from the street, even Allan knew that much; for, after all, such a procedure was followed only by the middle classes, and in this instance would result in nothing less than disaster.

It sounded reasonable, and Kirk allowed himself to be half convinced. It was no later than the following day, however, that Runnels pointed out two young ladies who were driving past and informed him that they were the Misses Fermina.

"Their old man has made a fortune out of the Pearl Islands," he remarked. "They say those girls have the finest collection of pearls in Central America."

Kirk gazed after them eagerly, but it took no more than a glance to show him that they were not even distantly related to the object of his search. Once more he set Allan upon the trail with instructions to find out who lived in the large house upon the hill—the one with the driveway of royal palms—and not to return without the information. But by now the Jamaican was beginning to weary of this running back and forth and to consider the quest a vain imagining. So, being wishful to dream another lottery number, he brought back with him a fanciful tale designed to quiet his employer and to assure himself ample leisure in the future.

"Master h'Auntony, your female is gone," he informed him, sadly.

"Gone! Where?"

"Somewhere—on a ship."

"Are you sure?"

"There is no doubt, sar. Her name is Garavel, and she h'occupies the big 'ouse on the 'ill. I discovered those h'impartant facts from the Bajan 'ooman."

"Stephanie! You saw her? By Jove! Then you are right this time. Quick! tell me all you learned."

Allan lied fluently, elaborately, and, finding his hero plunged into despair, resigned himself gratefully to another period of blissful idleness. This was much the simplest way, he decided; for even should Kirk meet a Garavel or a Fermina, there was no chance of his winning her, and love, after all, is but a passing impulse which may be summoned or banished at will by such simple mediums as charms. The boy did go out of his way to ease his benefactor's malady by taking a lock of his own fuzzy wool and placing it beneath Kirk's mattress, after certain exorcisms.

There followed a period of blank dejection. Kirk's first disappointment, when the girl had failed to keep her tryst, was as nothing compared to this, for now he felt that she was unattainable. He did not quite give up hope; so many strange experiences had befallen him since his involuntary departure from New York that it all seemed like a dream in which anything is possible. But he was deep in the doldrums when, with magic suddenness, the scene changed, and his long discouragement came to an end.

XIX. "LA TOSCA"

The winter season was at its height now. For weeks there had been no rain, and the Pacific side of the Isthmus was growing sere and yellow beneath the ceaseless glare of the sun. The musty dampness of the rainy season had disappeared, the steady trade−winds breathed a dreamy languor, and the days fled past in one long, unending procession of brilliant sameness. Every ship from the North came laden with tourists, and the social life of the city grew brilliant and gay. There were receptions, dinners, dances; the plazas echoed to the strains of music almost nightly. Now that Nature smiled, the work upon the Canal went forward with ever− growing eagerness. Records were broken in every department, the railroad groaned beneath its burden, the giant human machine was strained to its fullest efficiency.

Young Anthony mastered the details of his work very rapidly, for railroading had been bred into him. He needed little help from Runnels, and soon began to feel a conscious grasp of affairs as surprising to himself as to his chief. Being intensely interested in his work, he avoided all social entanglements, despite repeated invitations from Mrs. Cortlandt. But, when the grand−opera season began, he made an exception, and joined her box−party on the opening night.

It seemed quite like old times to don an evening suit; the stiff, white linen awakened a pang of regret. The time was not far distant when he had felt never so much at home as in these togs; but now they were hot and uncomfortable—and how they accentuated his coat of tan!

There was a somewhat formal dinner in the Cortlandts' new home, at which there were a dozen guests; so Kirk had no opportunity of speaking with his hostess until they had reached the theatre, where he found himself seated immediately behind her.

"I've scarcely seen you lately," she said, at the first opportunity. "You're a very neglectful young man."

"I knew you were getting settled in your house, and we've been tremendously busy at the office."

"I began to think you were avoiding us."

"You must know better than that."

She regarded him shrewdly over her shoulder. "You're not still thinking of—that night at Taboga? You haven't seemed the same since."

He blushed, and nodded frankly. "I can't help thinking about it. You were mighty nice to overlook a break like that, but—" Unconsciously his eyes shifted to Cortlandt, who was conversing politely with a giggly old lady from Gatun.

She tapped his cheek lightly with her fan. "Just to show you how forgiving I am, I am going to ask you to go riding with me. The late afternoons are lovely now, and I've found a good horse for you. I suppose you ride?"

"I love it."

"Wednesday, at five, then." She turned to another guest, and Kirk leaned back to take in the scene about him.

Like most Latin−American cities, Panama prides herself upon her government theatre, which is in truth very beautiful. Although it remains dark most of the year, its brief period of opera is celebrated by a notable outpouring. To−night the magnificent white−and−gold auditorium was filled to the topmost gallery, and the two circles of boxes were crowded with the flower of Panamanian society, tourists from the North, and Americans from the whole length of the Canal Zone. Kirk himself had seen to running a theatre special from Colon, and recognized all six of the Commissioners, with their families. It was an exceedingly well−dressed audience, and although the pit was plentifully sprinkled with men in white, the two lower galleries were in solid full−dress. Bejewelled women in elaborate gowns lent the affair almost the elegance of a night at the Metropolitan, while the flash of many uniforms made the scene colorful.

Suddenly the orchestra broke into the national air, and with a great rustling and turning of heads the audience rose to its feet. In the centre box of the first tier, ornately hung with flags and a coat of arms, Anthony beheld a giant black man of majestic appearance, drawn to his full height and flanked by a half−dozen aides in uniform, all at a stiff military salute.

"That is President Galleo," Edith told him.

"Jove! He's a regal−looking chap," Kirk exclaimed.

"He's very much of a man, too, yet even here there is a color line. Nobody acknowledges it, but the old Castilian families are keenly aware of it just the same."

As the last measured strain died out the audience reseated itself, the introduction to "La Tosca" sounded, and the curtain rose. Although the names of the performers were unknown to Kirk, their voices were remarkably good, and he soon became absorbed in the drama. A sudden lonesomeness surged over him as he recalled another night when he and Darwin K. Anthony had heard these same notes sung. But then they had sat enthralled by the art of Caruso, Scotti, and the ravishing Cavalieri. It had been one of the rare hours when he and his father had felt themselves really in sympathy. The Governor had come down for some fabulous directors' meeting, he remembered, and had wired his son to run in from New Haven for the evening. They had been real chums that night, and even at their modest little supper afterward, when the old gentleman had rowed with the waiter and cursed his dyspepsia, they had laughed and chatted like cronies. Yet a week later they had quarrelled.

With an unexpected access of tenderness, Anthony Jr. longed to see once more that tumbled shock of white hair, that strong−lined face; to hear again the gruff tones of that voice he loved so well. After all, there were only two Anthonys left in the world, and he had been to blame. He acknowledged that he had been a ne'er−do−well. No wonder his father had been harsh, but still—old Darwin K. should not have been so domineering, so ready to credit all he heard. Kirk pressed his lips together and swore to make good, if for no other reason than to show his dad.

As the curtain fell on the first act, he rose with the others and, accompanied by Mrs. Cortlandt, made his way down the long passageway and out into a brightly lighted, highly decorated foyer filling now with voluble people. It was a splendid room; but he had no eyes for it. His gaze was fixed upon the welcome open−air promenade outside, and his fingers fumbled with his cigarette− case.

"Oh, wait, please," he heard Edith say, "I want you to meet some one."

He had done little except respond to meaningless introductions all the evening, and nothing could have pleased him less at the moment. But, somewhat awkwardly, he began to edge his way through the press in the wake of his hostess. The next moment he halted and stood stock−still in helpless surprise.

There, not a yard away, was the girl of his dreams demurely bowing to Edith Cortlandt, her hand upon the arm of a swarthy man whom Kirk knew at once as her father. He felt the blood rush blindingly to his head, felt it drumming at his ears, knew that he must be staring like a man bereft. Mrs. Cortlandt was speaking, and he caught the name "Garavel" like a bugle−call. They turned upon him, the Spanish gentleman bowed, and he saw that Chiquita's little white−gloved hand was extended toward him.

She was the same dainty, desirous maid he had met in the forest, but now splendidly radiant and perfect beyond his imagining. She was no longer the simple wood−sprite, but a tiny princess in filmy white, moulded by some master craftsman. As on that earlier meeting, she was thrilling with some subtle mirth which flickered on her lips or danced in the depths of her great, dark eyes.

How he ever got through that wild introductory moment without making a show of himself, Anthony never knew, for his first overwhelming impulse was to seize the girl and never let her escape. It was the same feeling he had had at Las Savannas, only ten times harder to resist. The general confusion, perhaps, helped to hide his emotion, for around them eddied a constant human tide, through which at last came Mr. Cortlandt and the other members of his party. There were more introductions, more bows and polite exchanges of words which had the maddening effect of distracting Miss Garavel's attention. Then, by some glorious miracle, Kirk found himself moving toward the open air at her side, with Mrs. Cortlandt and the banker in advance of them.

"Oh, Chiquita," he said, softly, "I thought I'd NEVER find you. I've hunted everywhere."

At the tremulous intensity of his tone, she gave an uncertain laugh and flashed him a startled glance.

"Chiquita is not my name," she said, reprovingly.

"Yes, it is; it must be. I can't think of you by any other. Hasn't it been whispering at my ears ever since you said it? It has nearly driven me mad."

"Senor Antonio! I have seen you but once."

"I have seen you every day, every hour−"

"Indeed?"

"I can't see anything else. Don't you understand?"

"You forget that we have but just been introduced."

"Don't be offended; you see, I can't realize that I have found you at last. When I learned you had gone away, I thought I would surely−"

"I have been nowhere."

"Didn't you go away on a ship?"

"That is absurd! I have remained always in my father's house."

"Then wait until I catch that boy of mine! Didn't you know I was looking for you? Couldn't you FEEL it?"

"Indeed, why should I imagine such things?"

"Why, if you couldn't feel a thing like that, you can't love me."

"Of a certainly not," she gasped. "You should not joke about such things."

"I'm not joking; I never was so serious in my life. I−I'm afraid I can't tell you everything−it all wants to come out at once. Why didn't you come back as you promised?"

"It was Stephanie−she is such a ferocious person! I was brought to the city that day−but no, senor. I did not promise. I said only 'perhaps.'"

"Have you done your penance?"

"It was finished yesterday. This is the first time I have been out. Oh, it is delightful. The music−the people!"

"And I can come to see you now?"

"Very well do you know that you cannot. Have you not learned our customs?" Then, with an abrupt and icy change of tone: "I forget. Of course you are familiar with those customs, since you have become the wooer of Miss Torres."

"Oh, Lord! Where did you hear about that?"

"So! It is true. You are fickle, senor−or is it that you prefer dark people?"

"I was looking for you. I thought it was you behind those curtains all the time." He began a flurried defence of his recent outrageous behavior, to which Miss Garavel endeavored to listen with distant composure. But he was so desperately in earnest, so anxious to make light of the matter, so eager to expose all his folly and have done with it, that he must have been funnier than he knew. In the midst of his narrative the girl's eyes showed an encouraging gleam, and when he described his interview with Torres and Heran their surprise and dramatic indignation, she laughed merrily.

"Oh, it wasn't funny at the time," he hastened to add. "I felt as though I had actually proposed, and might have to pay alimony."

"Poor Maria! It is no light thing to be cast aside by one's lover. She is broken−hearted, and for six months she will do penance."

"This penance thing is a habit with you girls. But I wasn't her lover; I'm yours."

"Do not be foolish," she exclaimed, sharply, "or I shall be forced to walk with my father."

"Don't do that. Can't you see we must make haste while the curtain is down?"

"I do not see. I am strolling in search of the cool air." She bowed and smiled at some passing friends. She seemed very careless, very flippant. She was not at all the impetuous, mischievous Chiquita he had met in the woods.

"See here!" he said, soberly. "We can't go on this way. Now that I've met your father, I'm going to explain my intentions to him, and ask his permission to call on you."

"We have a—proverb, senor, 'Ir por lana, y volver trasquilado,' which means, 'Take heed lest you find what you do not seek.' Do not be impetuous."

"There's only one thing I'm seeking."

"My father is a stern man. In his home he is entirely a Spaniard, and if he learned how we met, for instance"−even under the electric light he saw her flush−"he would create a terrible scene." She paused in her walk and leaned over the stone balustrade, staring out across the ink−black harbor.

"Trust me! I shan't tell him."

"There are so many reasons why it is useless."

"Name one."

"One!" She shrugged lightly. "In the first place I care nothing for you. Is not that enough?"

"No, indeed. You'll get over that."

"Let us imagine, then, the contrary. You Americans are entirely different from our people. You are cold,

deliberate, wicked−your social customs are not like ours. You do not at all understand us. How then could you be interested to meet a Spanish family?"

"Why, you're half American."

"Oh yes, although it is to be regretted. Even at school in your Baltimore I learned many improper things, against which I have had to struggle ever since."

"For instance?"

"Ah," she sighed, "I saw so much liberty; I heard of the shocking conduct of your American ladies, and, while I know it is quite wrong and wicked, still−it is interesting. Why, there is no other nice girl in all Panama who would have talked with you as I did in the forest that day."

"But what has all this to do with my coming to see you?"

"It is difficult to explain, since you will not understand. When a young man is accepted into a Spanish house, many things are taken for granted. Besides that, we do not know each other, you and I. Also, if you should come to see me, it would cause gossip, misunderstanding among my friends."

"I'll declare myself in advance," he promised warmly.

"No, no, no! We Spanish−Americans do not care for strangers. We have our own people and we are satisfied. You Yankees are not very nice; you are barbarous; you assume such liberties. Our young men are gentle, modest, sweet—"

"Um−m! I hadn't noticed it."

"This is the first time I have ever talked so freely with a gentleman, and I suppose it is immodest. After all, it is much better that old people who are of more experience should discuss these questions."

"But don't you want to have a voice in your own affairs?" he eagerly urged. "Do you really want your relatives to tell you whom to meet, whom to love, and whom to marry?"

She answered, frankly: "Sometimes I feel that way. Yet at other times I am sure they must know best."

"I don't believe you are the sort to shut your eyes and do exactly as you're told."

"I do rebel sometimes. I protest, but it is only the American blood in me."

"If you'd learn to know me a little bit, maybe you'd enjoy having me around the house."

"But I cannot know you, any more than you can know me," she cried, with a little gesture of despair at his dullness. "Don't you see— before we could get acquainted nicely people would be talking?"

"Let's try. You're living at the country place again, aren't you? Suppose I should get lost some day—tomorrow, for instance?"

"No, no! Listen. It is the warning bell, and we must return."

The crowd was filing into the theatre now. They fell in behind Senor Garavel and Mrs. Cortlandt.

"I'm going hunting again tomorrow," prophesied Kirk, "and I'm almost certain to lose my way−about three o'clock."

"You should take with you a guide."

"That's not a bad idea. I'd like to talk it over with you. Suppose we have another stroll after the next act?"

"I shall be with my father. Never before have I enjoyed so much liberty." She sighed gratefully.

"Oh, I detest your blamed, straitlaced Spanish customs," he cried, hotly. "What do they amount to, anyhow? I love you. I do, I do−"

She laughed and darted to her father's side.

"Don't you think Miss Garavel is a pretty girl?" Mrs. Cortlandt questioned, as they strolled toward their box.

"She's a dream." Anthony's tone left nothing unsaid.

"You got along together capitally. Most of the senoritas are impossible."

"By the way, what is her name?"

"Gertrudis. Rather pleasing, I think."

Kirk thought so, too. In fact, it pleased him so greatly that he thought of nothing else during the entire second act of "La Tosca." It was even sweeter than the music of her hesitating accent.

When, after an age, the curtain fell for a second time, he escaped from his companions, mumbling some excuse or other, and made haste to find her again. But as he approached he felt a sudden pang of jealous rage.

Ramon Alfarez was beside her, and the two were chatting with an appearance of intimacy that made him furious. Close at hand stood Garavel, deep in conversation with Colonel Jolson.

"Ah, Ramon, I wish you to meet Mr. Anthony," said Gertrudis. "So! You have met before?"

"In Colon," Kirk explained, while Alfarez scorched him with his eyes. "Mr. Alfarez was very hospitable to me."

"Yes," the Spaniard exclaimed. "It is my great regret that Senor Ant'ony did not remain for longer."

"Ramon is with the President's party this evening. He is Senor Galleo's Secretary, you know."

"I informed you concerning those good fortunes some time since, eh?" Ramon's insulting stare made Kirk long to take him by the throat.

"Yes, you told me. I suppose it is a fine position."

Alfarez swelled pompously. "I 'ave many responsibilities."

"It brings you very close to the Chief Executive, no doubt."

"I 'ave indeed the honor to be his intimate!"

"He's the tallest negro I ever saw," Kirk said, simply, at which the haughty Ramon seemed about to explode, and Miss Garavel quite shamelessly giggled.

"That is funny," she exclaimed. "But you must not tease Ramon. You understand, the voice of the people has made Galleo President, but no one forgets that he is not one of us."

Her youthful countryman twisted his mustache with trembling fingers.

"It is politics!" he declared. "And yet Galleo is a great man; I am honor' to be his Secretary. But by the grace of God our next President will be w'ite."

"Ramon's father, Don Anibal, you know." Gertrudis nodded wisely at the American. "We are very proud of Ramon, he is so young to be high in politics."

"Eh! Yes, and many of our bravest patriots 'ave been black men."

"Oh, we've had some brave negroes, too," Kirk acknowledged.

"So! You see!" Alfarez was triumphant.

"The greatest fighter we ever had was a colored chap."

"Ah!"

"His name was Gans−Joe Gans."

"You are still joking," said Miss Garavel. "In Baltimore I read the newspapers about that Gans. He was a−box−fighter, what?"

"Exactly. But he never carried a Secretary."

Alfarez's countenance was sallow as he inquired:

"Does Senor Ant'ony discover our climate to be still agreeable?"

"Very. It hasn't grown too warm for me yet."

"We are but approaching our 'ot season." The speaker's eyes snapped.

"Oh, I'll stand the heat all right, and the mosquitoes, too."

"Eh! Do not be too sure. The mosquito makes a leetle buzzing−but it is well to take warning. If not, behol', some day you grow ver' seeck."

Heretofore Kirk had hated Ramon in a careless, indifferent sort of way, feeling that he owed him a good drubbing, which he would be pleased to administer if ever a fitting time arrived. But now, since he saw that the jackanapes had the audacity to love Gertrudis, his feeling became intense. The girl, of course, was fully alive to the situation, and, although she evidently enjoyed it, she did her best to stand between the two men.

As for Alfarez, he was quick to feel the sudden fierce hostility he had aroused, and it seemed to make him nervous. Moreover, he conceived that he had scored heavily by his last retort, at which Kirk had only smiled. It therefore seemed best to him to withdraw from the conversation (annoyingly conducted in English), and a few moments later he stalked majestically away. This was just what Kirk wanted, and he quickly suggested the balcony. But Gertrudis was obstinate.

"I must remain with my father," she said.

"May I sit beside you, then? I've been thinking of a lot of things to say. I always think of bully remarks when it's too late. Now I've forgotten them. Do you know, I'm going to nestle up to your father and make him like me?"

"Again you are speaking of that subject. I have known you but an hour, and you talk of nothing but my father, of me, of coming to call."

"Well, I can't think of anything else."

"You are too bold. Spanish fathers do not like such young men. But to hear me talk!" She flushed slightly. "I have lost all modesty to speak of those things. You force me to embarrass myself."

"I was an instantaneous success with Miss Torres' father. He was ready to send a dray for my trunks."

"Let us discuss other things."

"I haven't the strength. You once spoke of a chap your people had picked out. It isn't−Alfarez?"

She let her dark eyes rest upon his a moment, and his senses swam. Then she nodded slowly.

"You do not like him?"

"Just like a nose−bleed. The day you and I are married I'm going to send him a wreath of poison ivy."

"It pleases you always to joke."

"No joke about that. You won't give in, will you?"

"There is no question of force nor of surrender, senor. I insist now that we shall speak of other things."

A few moments later he was constrained to rejoin his hostess' party.

"When are you going back to Las Savannas?" he asked, as he reluctantly arose.

"To−morrow."

"The hunting ought to be good−"

But she frowned at him in annoyance, and he left her, after all, without knowing whether he had gained or lost ground. Of one thing only he was sure−their meeting had been in some respects a disappointment. She was not by any means so warm and impulsive as he had supposed. Her girlishness, her simplicity, her little American ways, cloaked a deep reserve and a fine sense of the difference in their positions. She could be Spanish enough when she chose, he perceived, and he felt, as he was intended to feel, that the little lady of quality he had met to−night would be much harder to win than the girl of the woods. The plague of it was that, if anything, he was more in love with the definite and dazzling Gertrudis Garavel than he had been with the mysteriously alluring Chiquita. If only she were all American, or even all Spanish, perhaps he would know better how to act. But, unfortunately, she was both−just enough of both to be perplexing and wholly unreliable. And then, too, there was Alfarez!

XX. AN AWAKENING

He was in no more satisfactory frame of mind when, on the next afternoon, he shouldered his gun and set out for the country, He went directly to the fairy pool, and waited there in a very fever of anxiety. Despite the coolness and peace of the place, he felt his pulses throb and his face burn. If she came, it would mean everything to him. If she stayed away−why, then he would have to believe that, after all, the real Gertrudis Garavel had spoken last night at the opera, and that the sprightly, mirthful little maid who had bewitched him on their first meeting no longer existed. An odd bashfulness overtook him. It did not seem to him that it could possibly have been he who had talked to her so boldly only the evening before. At the thought of his temerity he felt almost inclined to flee, yet he would not have deserted his post for worlds. The sound of a voice shot through his troubled thoughts like a beam of sunlight through a dark room.

"Oh, Senor Antonio! How you startled me!"

Instantly his self−possession came back. He felt relieved and gay.

"Good−afternoon, queen!" He rose and bowed politely. "I thought I saw one underneath the waterfall just now."

"Who would have expected you to be here?" she cried, with an extreme and obviously counterfeit amazement that filled him with delight.

"I'm lost," he declared; then, after one look into her eyes, he added, "Absolutely, utterly, irretrievably lost."

"It is very fortunate that I chanced to be passing, for this is a lonely spot; nobody ever comes here."

"Well, I hardly ever lose myself in busy places. Won't you sit down?"

"Since we have met quite by accident, perhaps it would not be so very improper," She laughed mischievously.

"You know I've been lost now for several months. It's a delightful feeling−you ought to try it."

She settled uncertainly beside him like a butterfly just alighting, ready to take flight again, on the instant.

"Perhaps I can help you to find your way, senor?" she said, with ingenuous politeness.

"You are the only one who can, Miss Garavel. I don't know that I ever told you, but I'm in love."

"Indeed?"

"I am the most miserably happy person in the world, for I have just this moment begun to believe that the young lady likes me a little bit."

"Oh! But I forgot the real reason why I came. I have something I must tell you."

"All right. But honestly now, didn't you WANT to come?"

She turned upon him in a little burst of passion. "Yes!" she cried. "Of course I did! I wished to come, madly, senor. There is no use to lie. But wait! It is wholly because I am a−what you call fleert−a very sad fleert." No one could possibly describe the quaint pronunciation she gave the word. "It makes my heart patter, like that"—she made her little fingers "patter"−"to be wooed even by a Yankee. But I do not love you in the least. Oh no! Even if I wished to do so, there are too many reasons why I could not, and when I explain you will understand."

"I know; it's Ramon Alfarez. You're half−way engaged to him—but you know you don't love him."

"Ah! It is not too sure. He is of fine family, he is rich, he is handsome−not possibly could I care for any man who was not all of those. All my life I have thought him a very sweet gentleman, and for a long time it has been agreed that I should be his wife. Even all the young ladies are furious at me, which is very nice also−so it is only because I am disobedient that I rebelled. But I was punished for my evil disposition." She sighed mournfully. "And now it is all arranged once more."

"Is it really signed, sealed, stamped, and delivered in the presence of?"

"No, no; but 'Arco siemprc armado'−"

"Of course. Is that a prescription?"

"'A bow long bent grows weak.' And there are so many reasons why I should say yes."

"You haven't mentioned any that would be binding in law."

"My father's wish. Is not that sufficient?"

"You disregarded that once."

"That was but a flutter. All the time I knew I should be Ramon's wife when the time arrived. But it made him

so unhappy that I was quite pleased. Only for those ugly blue dresses, I would have greatly enjoyed my penance. Perhaps I could refuse to wed a man my father chose for me, but no nice Spanish girl would dare to wed a man her father did not like. Do you see?"

"But it's no cinch your father won't positively hunger for me, once we get chummy."

"And I for Ramon? How sad that would be, eh?"

"Really, now, couldn't you bring yourself to marry a chap who wasn't aristocratic, rich, and handsome? You know that's a tough combination. Most aristocratic people are poor, and the rich ones have dyspepsia."

"Oh no! I am quite certain."

"Suppose I should show you a family tree that you couldn't throw a stone over?"

"It would not do at all. I am so extravagant."

"I fully intend to be rich, some time."

"But you are not handsome, senor." Her eyes travelled over him with a mischievous twinkle. "You are too beeg."

"I'm very durable; I'd last a long time."

She shook her dark head decisively, and he saw the lights that rippled in her profuse crown of hair.

"You are too different, you disregard our customs, you are bold. You continue to come here against my wishes, which no Spanish gentleman would dare to do."

"Oh, I'm no Spanish gentleman. I'm just an emotional blond; but I'm bound to marry you."

"If one of my countrymen found me so indiscreet as to talk with him alone like this, he would go away and never come back. I am amazed at you, senor. Have you no pride?"

"Not a bit; and now that I have met all your objections, let's arrange the details. Shall it be a church wedding?"

She laughed deliciously. "What a nice game it is we have played! But now I must talk seriously."

"You witch!" he breathed. "Do you think I could ever give you up?"

She checked him gravely. "Truly, it was just a game−and yet it was not altogether so, either. But here is what I came to say. The strangest thing has happened−not until last night after the opera did I even dream of it, and−even now I cannot believe. Oh, I am so proud!"

"More bad news for me, I suppose."

"Yes. But such good news for me that I am sure you will be glad." Timidly he reached out and touched a fold of her white dress. She seemed to be slipping from him. "Coming home from the theatre my father told me−oh, the most wonderful thing! He said−but how shall I speak of such a secret?"

"Evidently you don't intend to."

"I promised very faithfully not to tell, so−he is to be the next President of Panama."

"Pres−" Anthony stared at her in frank amazement. "Why, I thought old man Alfarez−"

"It seems your country does not like him because he hates Americans−see? This is the work of that Mr. Cortlandt. Think! Is it not wonderful? Now that you know the truth, you must see at once that by no means could I marry to a person like you."

"Why not?"

"Ohe! Don't you understand? I shall be the finest lady in the Republic. All men will adore me. I will have suitors−not one or two as now, but many. I will be'the beautiful Senorita Garavel,' for all the great people are beautiful. I shall be proud, also, and I shall not even speak to Yankees any more. My father will be the most famous man of all the Republic−perhaps in the whole world, I don't know."

"I don't think it will make any difference with him when he knows who I am."

"Then you also are a great man, eh?" She hitched herself about, to face him more squarely. "That is truly interesting. He would scarcely wish a railroad conductor to address the daughter of President Garavel."

"Oh, I've been promoted since I was out here last. Anyhow, I guess my dad is pretty nearly as good as anybody in Panama."

"He is, then, of blue blood?"

"No! Red."

"Oh, but a gentleman!"

"He is now. He used to be a brakeman."

"You appear to be−proud of such a thing! How strange! My father's blood runs back to the conquistadors;

even in the earliest books one finds Garavels. They were conquerors, they ruled this country and all these people."

"That's something to be proud of, but it isn't everything. High− bred horses run well, but they can't pull. It's the old farm nag that delivers the merchandise. But I'll tackle your father, and I'll promise to vote for him."

"You are very fonny." She gazed at him seriously, one tiny foot curled under her, her chin nestling into her palm.

"Do you love me?"

"Not one single speck. I merely like you to make love at me and cause my heart to jomp! But that is not fair to you, is it?−since you can have no hope."

The little hypocrite continued to voice words of warning and denial, though her eyes invited him, and for a long time they continued this delightful play of pleading and evasion. But at last Chiquita jumped up with a great appearance of alarm.

"Heavens! the time," she cried. "I have stayed too long by much. Stephanie will miss me."

He rose and stretched out his hand as if to hold her.

"Shall I come again to−morrow?"

She grew suddenly earnest.

"No, no, senor. That is something you should not ask. If ever we are to meet again, it must be with my father's consent. Please! Do not urge, for truly I would have to refuse." She let her palm rest in his an instant, and her cheek went scarlet as he pressed it to his lips. Then she said: "Go, Mr. Brazen One. How greatly it surprised me to find you here I cannot say. It gave me such a start! And, Senor Antonio—my father may be found any day at his bank." Before he could detain her she was gone, flitting up the path with just one flashing smile of mischief over her shoulder.

Anthony went home with his head in the clouds. All his doubts were now at rest; for while Chiquita had stubbornly denied him all encouragement, he felt sure that her heart had answered. It was in the highest spirits, therefore, that he opened a letter he found awaiting him, and read as follows:

DEAR KIRK,—I hope you are heartily sick of yourself and ready to do something decent for a change. Knowing your aristocratic habits as I do, I realize you must owe a lot of money by this time, and your new friends must be getting tired of you. I have been expecting you to draw on me daily, and am taking this occasion to warn you in your own expensively acquired college English that "THERE IS NOTHING DOING"—except upon one condition. If you will agree to behave yourself in future, I will pay your debts, send you West, and give you a job as operator at forty dollars a month. BUT—you will go where I send you, and you will stay where you are put. I will do the thinking for both of us and judge of your associates. Maybe if you prove to be any good at all, I will arrange with the police to let you spend your vacations in "that dear New York," which still shows signs of your red—paint brush. I would be pleased to have an apology by return mail, so that I may meet you in New Orleans and start you off once more on the road to decency and self−respect. You will never be a success at anything, but I am always ready to do my duty. This is my last offer, and if you refuse you may distinctly and definitely go to the devil. As ever, Your loving father, DARWIN K. ANTHONY.

P.S.—I can get GOOD operators for thirty dollars a month. The extra ten dollars is pure sentiment.

Kirk had known in advance just about what the letter contained, and now laughed aloud. It was so like the old gentleman! Why, he could almost hear him dictating it.

Spurred by his present exhilaration, he wrote an answer, which he read with a good deal of satisfaction before sealing it up.

DEAR DAD,−Your affectionate letter, with the kind offer to take charge of a siding out in the Dakotas, is at hand. I would like to help you along with your business, but "Upward and onward" is my motto, and you'll have to raise that salary a bit. I am drawing two hundred and twenty−five dollars a month at present, quarters furnished and promotion promised. I have made some good investments, and there are no debts to settle. Enclosed find my last bank statement, which will doubtless prove a great disappointment to you.

If you need a good Master of Transportation, I would be pleased to consider an offer at any time, provided the salary is satisfactory, but your proposal to edit my acquaintances is out of the question. My decency and self respect are doing well, thank you, and I like the climate.

Outside my window a mocking−bird sings nightly, and I have a tame rabbit with ears like a squirrel and baby−blue eyes—also a Jamaican negro boy who, I fear, could not stand our harsh Northern winters.

The salary would have to be about six thousand a year. As always,

Your devoted and obedient son, KIRK.

P.S.—I would not care to locate farther west than Buffalo. My wife might not like it.

"If he survives the first part, that tag line will put him down for the count," mused the writer, with a grin. "And, yet, something tells me he will not embrace my offer. Ah, well! Promotion is slow." He whistled blithely as he sent Allan off to the post−office.

Kirk lost no time in calling at the bank, but was disappointed to learn that Senor Andres Garavel had left the city for an unexpected business tour of the Provinces and would not return for at least two weeks. At first he was inclined to doubt the truth of this statement, but a casual inquiry from Mrs. Cortlandt confirmed it, and, cursing his luck, he sought distraction where he could most easily find it.

In the days that followed he saw nothing of Gertrudis, but a good deal of Edith Cortlandt. She had redeemed her promise of getting him a good horse−something rare in this country−and he was grateful for the exercise, which came as a welcome relief from his indoor toil. They rode almost daily; he dined at her house, and once again made one of her party at the opera. Soon their old friendly intercourse was going on as if it had never been interrupted.

As for Edith, this unsatisfying, semi−public intimacy came to be quite as much a pain as a pleasure to her. During these past few weeks she had been plunged in a mental turmoil, the signs of which she had concealed with difficulty. She had fought with herself; she had tried to reason; she had marshalled her pride, but all in vain. At last she awoke to the terrifying certainty that she was in love. It had all begun with that moment of impulsive surrender at Taboga. The night following had been terrible to her. In its dark hours she had seen her soul for the first time, and the glimpse she got frightened her. Following this, she became furious with herself, then resentful toward Anthony; next she grew desperate and reckless.

She began to look upon her husband with a quickened curiosity, and found him a stranger. For years she had made allowance for his weaknesses, ignoring them as she ignored his virtues; but never before had he appeared so colorless, so insignificant, above all so alien. She had barely tolerated him hitherto, but now she began to despise him.

If Cortlandt was aware of her change of feeling and its cause, his method of dealing with her showed some keenness. Silent contempt was what she could least endure from him of all men; yet this was just what his manner toward her expressed−if it expressed anything. Beyond those words as they were leaving the island, he had said nothing, had never referred to the incident, had not so much as mentioned Anthony's name unless forced to do so, and this offended her unreasonably. She caught him regarding her strangely at times with a curious, faltering expression, but he was so icy in his reserve, he yielded so easily to her predominance, that she could divine nothing and turned the more fiercely to her inward struggle. Even if he did suspect, what then? It was no affair of his; she was her own mistress. She had given him all he possessed, she had made a man of him. He was her creature, and had no rights beyond what she chose to give. They saw less and less of each other. He became more formal, more respectfully unhusbandlike. He spent few daylight hours in the house, coming and going as he pleased, frequenting the few clubs of the city, or riding alone. On more than one occasion he met her and Anthony on their horses. Only before others, or at their frequent political councils, were they quite the same as they had been.

Of Anthony, on the other hand, she arranged to see more than ever, flattering him by a new deference in her manner, making him feel always at ease with her, watching him vainly for the least sign of awakening desire. In their frequent rides they covered most of the roads about the city, even to the ruins of old Panama. Then they began to explore the by−paths and trails.

One afternoon they turned into an unfrequented road that led off to the jungle from the main highway, walking their horses while they marvelled at the beauty of the foliage. The trail they knew led to a coffee plantation far up among the hills, but it was so little travelled that the verdure brushed them as they went, and in many places they passed beneath a roof of branches. Before they had penetrated a quarter of a mile they were in the midst of an unbroken solitude, shut off from the world by a riotous glory of green, yellow, and crimson. They had not spoken for a long time, and were feeling quite content with the pleasant monotony of— their journey, when they burst out into a rocky glen where a spring of clear water bubbled forth. With a common impulse they reined in; Twenty feet farther on the trail twisted into the screen of verdure and was lost.

"What a discovery!" exclaimed Edith. "Help me down, please, I'm going to drink."

Kirk dismounted and lent her a hand; the horses snorted appreciatively, and stepping forward, thrust their soft muzzles eagerly into the stream, then fell to browsing upon the tender leaves at their shoulders.

Edith quenched her thirst, shook the cramp from her limbs, and said: "Some time we will have to see where this road leads. There may be more surprises beyond." She broke a flower from its stem and fastened it in Kirk's buttonhole, while he gazed down at her with friendly eyes.

"You're looking awfully well lately," he declared.

Glancing up, she met his gaze and held it for an instant. "It's the open air and the exercise. I enjoy these rides with you more than I can say." Something in her look gave him a little thrill of embarrassment.

"I think I'll give Marquis and Gyp their dessert," he said, and, turning aside, began to gather a handful of the greenest leaves. The instant his eyes were off her, she took the horses by their bridles, swung them about, and with a sharp blow of her riding− crop sent them snorting and clattering down the trail. Kirk wheeled barely in time to see them disappearing.

"Here!" he cried, sharply. "What are you doing?"

"They bolted."

"They'll hike straight for town. Now I'll have to chase—" He glanced at her sharply. "Say, why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to. Isn't that reason enough?" Her eyes were reckless and her lips white.

"You shouldn't do a thing like that!" he cried, gruffly. "It's foolish. Now I'll have to run them down."

"Oh, you can't catch them."

"Well, I'll have a try at it, anyhow." He tossed away his handful of leaves.

"Silly! I did it because I wanted to talk with you."

"Well, those horses wouldn't overhear."

"Don't be angry, Kirk. I haven't seen you alone since that night."

"Taboga?" he said, guiltily. "You're not going to lecture me again? I'm sorry enough as it is." Never in all his life had he felt more uncomfortable. He could not bring himself to meet her gaze, feeling that his own face must be on fire.

"What a queer chap you are! Am I so unattractive that you really want to rush off after those horses?" He said nothing, and she went on after a moment of hesitation: "I have known men who would have thought it a privilege to be left alone with me like this."

"I—have no doubt."

"You remember, for instance, I told you there was one man at Taboga whom I did not wish to see?"

"Yes—at the sanitarium."

"Well, something like this happened once—with him—and I told Stephen."

"And did you tell Mr. Cortlandt what I did?"

"Do you think I would have come riding with you if I had?" She shook her head. "Kirk, I used to think you were an unusually forward young man, but you're not very worldly, are you?"

"N−no—yes! I guess I'm as wise as most fellows."

"Sometimes I think you are very stupid."

He began firmly: "See here, Mrs. Cortlandt, you have been mighty good to me, and I'm indebted to you and your husband for a whole lot. I am terribly fond of you both."

She clipped a crimson bloom from its stem with a vicious blow of her crop, then, with eyes fixed upon the fallen flower, broke the awkward pause that followed.

"I suppose," she said, half defiantly, "you know how things are with Stephen and me—everybody must know, I suppose. I have done a lot of thinking lately, and I have made up my mind that the last appeal of what is right or wrong lies with one's self. I'm not going to care any longer what the world thinks of my actions so long as my own heart justifies them. Happiness—that is what I want, and I will have it—I will have it at any cost. It is my right. Because a woman marries without love, is it right for her to forego love all her life? I think not."

She looked up, and with a change of tone ran on swiftly: "I have studied you for a long time, Kirk. I know the sort of man you are. I know you better than you know yourself. Very lately I have begun to study myself, too, and I know, at last, the sort of woman I am." She drew near and laid a hand on each shoulder, forcing him to look

straight into her eyes. "I am not like most women; I can't do things by halves; I can't temporize with vital things; I prefer to experiment, even blindly. I used to think I was born to rule, but I think now that a woman's only happiness lies in serving; and I used to believe I was contented, when all the time I was waiting for something and didn't know it. Don't be silly now; you're just like every other man."

"I can't pretend to misunderstand you, although—Listen!" He cut his words short. "Here comes some one."

She turned her head, as from the direction their mounts had taken came the sound of approaching hoots.

"Natives from the hills." She nodded carelessly toward the purple mountains back of them. But the next moment she gave a little gasp of consternation. Out from the overhung path, with a great rustling of leaves, came, not the expected flea−bitten Panama horse, but a familiar bay, astride of which was Stephen Cortlandt. He was leading Marquis and Gyp by their bridles, and reined in at sight of his wife and her companion.

"Hello!" he said. "I caught your horses for you."

"Jove! That's lucky!" Kirk greeted the husband's arrival with genuine relief. "They bolted when we got down to take a drink, and we were getting ready for a long walk. Thanks, awfully."

"No trouble at all. I saw them as they came out on the main road." Cortlandt's pigskin saddle creaked as he bent forward to deliver the reins. He was as cool and immaculate as ever. He met Edith's eyes without the slightest expression. "Nice afternoon for a ride."

"If I had known you were riding to−day you might have come with us," she said.

He smiled in his wintry fashion, then scanned the surroundings appreciatively.

"Pretty spot, isn't it? If you are going back, I'll ride with you."

"Good enough. May I give you a hand, Mrs. Cortlandt?" Kirk helped Edith to her seat, at which her husband bowed his thanks. Then the three set out in single file.

"Which way?" inquired Stephen as they reached the highroad.

"Back to town, I think," Edith told him, "And you?"

"I'm not ready yet. See you later." He raised his hat and cantered easily away, while the other two turned their horses' heads toward the city.

XXI. THE REST OF THE FAMILY

The time for Senor Garavel's return having arrived, Kirk called at the bank, and found not the least difficulty in gaining an audience. Indeed, as soon as he had reminded the banker of their former meeting, he was treated with a degree of cordiality that surpassed his expectations.

"I remember quite well, sir," said Garavel—"'La Tosca.' Since you are a friend of Mrs. Cortlandt I shall be delighted to serve you."

Now that they were face to face, Kirk felt that he distinctly approved of Chiquita's father. This dignified, distinguished− looking gentleman awaited his pleasure with an air of leisurely courtesy that would have made him under other circumstances very easy of approach. But there was a keenness in his dark eyes that suggested the futility of beating round the bush. Kirk felt suddenly a little awkward.

"I have something very particular to say to you," he began, diffidently, "but I don't know just how to get at it."

Garavel smiled graciously. "I am a business man."

"This isn't business," blurted Kirk; "it's much more important. I want to have it over as quickly as possible, so I'll be frank. I have met your daughter, Mr. Garavel"—the banker's eyes widened in a look of disconcerting intensity—"and I am in love with her— sort of a shock, isn't it? It was to me. I'd like to tell you who I am and anything else you may wish to know."

"My dear sir, you surprise me—if you are really serious. Why, you have seen her but once—a moment, at the theatre!"

"I met her before that night, out at your country place. I had been hunting, and on my way home through the woods I stumbled upon your swimming−pool. She directed me to the road."

"But even so!"

"Well, I loved her the first instant I saw her."

"I knew nothing of this. If you had reason to think that your suit would be acceptable, why did you not come to me before?"

"I couldn't. I didn't know your name. I was nearly crazy because I couldn't so much as learn the name of the girl I loved!" Kirk plunged confusedly into the story of his search for Chiquita.

"That is a strange tale," said Senor Garavel, when he had finished—"a very strange tale—and yet you did well to tell it me. At present I do not know what to think. Young men are prone to such romantic fancies, rash and ill−considered. They are, perhaps, excusable, but—−"

"Oh, I suppose you can't understand how a fellow falls so deep in love on such short acquaintance, but I have been brooding over this for months—there's nothing hasty or ill−considered about it, I can assure you. I am terribly hard hit, sir; it means everything to me."

"If you would tell me something about yourself, I might know better in what light to regard this affair."

"Gladly—though there isn't much to tell. Just now I'm working on the P.R.R. as assistant to Runnels—the Master of Transportation, you know. I like the work and expect to be promoted. I have a little money—just enough to give me a fresh start if I should lose out here, and—oh, well, I'm poor but honest; I suppose that's about the size of it." He paused, vaguely conscious that he had not done himself justice. What else was there to say about Kirk Anthony? Then he added as an afterthought:

"My father is a railroad man, in Albany, New York."

"In what capacity is he employed, may I ask?" said Garavel, showing something like real interest.

Kirk grinned at this, and, seeing a copy of Bradstreet's on the banker's table, turned to his father's name, which he pointed out rather shamefacedly. Senor Garavel became instantly less distant.

"Of course the financial world knows Darwin K. Anthony," said he. "Even we modest merchants of the tropics have heard of him; and that his son should seek to win success upon his own merits is greatly to his credit. I congratulate you, sir, upon your excellent progress."

"I hope to make good," said Kirk, simply, "and I think I can." Then he flushed and hesitated as a realization of the situation swept over him. Could he gain the favor of Chiquita's father under false pretences? Surely it was only just that a man should stand upon his own merits, and yet—it didn't seem quite right. At length, he said, with

an effort:

"I ought to tell you, sir, that I am not on good terms with my father, at present. In fact, he has cast me off. That is why I am here supporting myself by hard work, instead of living in idleness. But I'm beginning to like the work—and I'll make good— I'll do it if only to show my father his mistake. That's what I care about most. I don't want his money. It's easier to make money than I thought. But I must succeed, for his sake and my own."

Despite his embarrassment, his face shone with sudden enthusiasm. He looked purposeful and aggressive, with a certain sternness that sat well upon his young manhood. Garavel lifted his brows.

"May I inquire the cause of this—estrangement?"

"Oh, general worthlessness on my part, I suppose. Come to think of it, I must have been a good deal of a cross. I never did anything very fierce, though." He smiled a little sadly. "I don't wonder that I fail to impress you."

A quick light of thought flashed through the banker's eyes. He was a keen judge of men.

"Well, well," he said, with a trace of impatience, "there is no need to go into the matter further. Your proposal is impossible— for many reasons it is impossible, and yet—your spirit is commendable."

"Does that mean you won't even allow me to see your daughter?"

"It would be useless."

"But I love Gertrudis," said Kirk, desperately.

Garavel looked a trifle pitying.

"You are by no means the first," he said; "I have been besieged by many, who say always the same thing—without Gertrudis they cannot, they will not, they should not live. And yet I have heard of no deaths. At first I was greatly concerned about them—poor fellows—but most of them are married now, so I not do take your words too seriously." He laughed good−naturedly. "You unemotional Americans do not love at first sight."

"I do, sir."

"Tut! It is but admiration for a beautiful girl who—I say it—is wicked enough to enjoy creating havoc. Take time, my boy, and you will smile at this madness. Now, let us talk of something else."

"It is no use, sir, I have it bad."

"But when you make such a request as this, you assume to know the young lady's wishes in the matter."

"Not at all. Without your consent I don't believe she'd allow herself to even like me. That is why I want to fix it with you first."

"In that, at least, you are quite right, for Gertrudis is a good girl, and obedient, as a general rule; but—it is impossible. Her marriage has been arranged."

"Do you think that is quite fair to her? If she loves Ramon Alfarez—−"

Once again Garavel's brows signalled surprise. "Ah, you know?"

"Yes, sir. I was about to say, if she really loves him, I can't make any difference; but suppose she should care for me?"

"Again it could make no difference, once she had married Ramon. But she is too young to know her own mind. These young girls are impressionable, romantic, foolish. I can see no object in deliberately courting trouble. Can you? In affairs of the heart it is well to use judgment and caution—qualities which come only with age. Youth is headstrong and blinded by dreams, hence it is better that marriage should be arranged by older persons."

"Exactly! That's why I want you to arrange mine." The banker smiled in spite of himself, for he was not without a sense of humor, and the young man's sincerity was winning.

"It is out of the question," he said; "useless to discuss. Forgetting for the moment all other considerations, there is an obstacle to your marriage into a Spanish family, which you do not stop to consider—one which might well prove insurmountable. I speak of religion."

"No trouble there, sir."

"You are, then, a Catholic?"

"It was my mother's faith, and I was brought up in it until she died. After that, I—sort of neglected it. You see, I am more of a Catholic than anything else."

"What we call a 'bad Catholic'?"

"Yes, sir. But if I were not, it wouldn't make any difference. Chiquita is my religion." "Who?" The father started.

"I—I call her that," Kirk explained, in confusion. "To myself, of course."

"Indeed! So do I," said Senor Garavel, dryly. For a moment he frowned in meditation. There were many things to consider. He felt a certain sympathy for this young man, with his straightforwardness and artless brusquerie. Moreover, though the banker was no great respecter of persons, the mention of Darwin K. Anthony had impressed him. If Kirk were all that he seemed, he had no doubt of the ultimate reconciliation of father and son. At all events, it would do no harm to learn more of this extraordinary suitor, and meanwhile he must treat him with respect while carefully guarding his own dignity against possibly impertinent advances.

"She has been promised to Ramon," he said, at last, "and I have considered her future quite settled. Of course, such arrangements are frequently altered for various causes, even at the last moment, but—quien sabe?" He shrugged his shoulders. "She may not wish to entertain your suit. So why discuss it? Why make plans or promises? It is a matter to be handled with the greatest delicacy; there are important issues linked with it. Where there is the prospect of an alliance between two houses—of business or politics—you will understand that according to our ideas, those considerations must govern—absolutely. Otherwise—I do not know— I can say nothing to encourage you except—that, for a young man I have known so very short a time"—he smiled genially—"you have impressed me not unfavorably. I thank you for coming to me, at any rate."

The two men rose and shook hands; Kirk was not altogether cast down by the result of the interview. He understood the banker's allusion to the possible change of arrangements, and felt sure from what Chiquita had told him that the marriage with Ramon could not take place after the true nature of Garavel's political aspirations became known. In that case, if all went well, it did not seem impossible that Garavel would give his consent, and then Gertrudis alone would remain to be won. If, on the other hand, her father refused his permission—well, there are many ways of winning a bride. Kirk believed in his lucky star, and had a constitutional inability to imagine failure.

The truth was that Andres Garavel had not hesitated long after that memorable night at the Tivoli before accepting the brilliant prize which the Cortlandts had dangled so alluringly before his eyes, and, the decision once made, he had entered into the scheme with all his soul. He was wise enough, however, to leave his destiny largely in their hands. This meant frequent councils among the three, a vast amount of careful work, of crafty intrigue, of untiring diplomacy, and, although his candidacy had not as yet been more than whispered, the purple robe of power was daily being woven, thread by thread.

It was not long after Kirk's visit to the bank that Garavel, during one of these conferences, took occasion to bring up the young man's name. Cortlandt had been called to the telephone, and Edith was left free to answer without constraint.

"I have seen you and him riding quite frequently," her guest remarked, with polite interest. "Is he, then, an old friend?"

"Yes, we are very fond of him."

"Your Mr. Runnels believes him most capable; we were speaking of him but yesterday."

"Oh, he will be successful, if that's what you mean; I shall see to that. He has his father's gift for handling men—−"

"You know his father?"

"Not personally, only by reputation. Kirk will be promoted soon, by−the−way, although he doesn't know it. He is to replace Runnels as soon as he is able."

"Remarkable—and yet I have seen the marvels you work, dear lady. But is not this a strange sphere of activity for the son of Darwin K. Anthony?"

"Oh, he had some kind of falling−out with his father, I believe, which occasioned his coming here. There was nothing really to Kirk's discredit—of that I am perfectly sure."

"It would be unfortunate, indeed, if this breach between father and son should prove serious."

"Oh, I dare say it won't. Kirk is certain to succeed, and old Anthony will come round, if I know American fathers."

Garavel smiled, well pleased that he had treated his recent visitor with proper consideration. After all, why not invite the young fellow to his house? That would be rather a significant step according to Spanish custom; yet he need not be bound by it. He could put a stop to the affair at any time. Besides, despite his frequent protestations to the contrary, he was somewhat influenced by his daughter's desire for more liberty. It was not fair to her, he

thought in his heart, that she should know only Ramon. One reason especially appealed to his pride. If a break came between him and Alfarez, Ramon must not appear to have jilted Gertrudis. If, meanwhile, she had another suitor, and one of distinguished family, the affair would wear a better look. It cannot be denied that the name of Darwin K. Anthony rang musically in his ears.

"The boy has the right stuff in him," Edith went on. "He began at the bottom, only a few months ago, preferring to work his way up, though he was offered a first−rate position to begin with."

She would have said more, but just at that moment her husband entered. "You were saying that Alfarez suspects," said Cortlandt, addressing Garavel. "Has he said anything?"

"Not to me, as yet, but he surely must know; the rumors must have reached him. He is cold—and Ramon acts queerly. I feel guilty— almost as if I had betrayed a friend."

"Nonsense! There is no room for fine scruples in politics. We mustn't be in too great a hurry, though. Things are going smoothly, and when the time comes you will be called for. But it must be the voice of the people calling. Bocas, Chiriqui, Colon— they must all demand Garavel." Cortlandt sighed. "I shall be very glad when it is over." He looked more pale, more bloodless, more world−weary than ever.

"You need have no fear that it will cause serious trouble between you and the General," Mrs. Cortlandt assured Garavel. "Ramon should be able to effect peace, no matter what happens."

"Ah, I am not so sure that there will be a marriage between Gertrudis and him. Young ladies are most uncertain when allowed the slightest liberty."

"Is she growing rebellious?" Cortlandt inquired. "If I were you, then, I wouldn't force her. A loveless marriage is a tragic thing."

His wife nodded her agreement.

"Not exactly rebellious. She would do whatever I asked regardless of her own feelings, for that is the way we Spaniards bring up our daughters, but—she is cold to Ramon, and he, I believe, is suspicious of my intentions toward his father. Therefore, the situation is strained. It is very hard to know what is right in a case of this sort. The young are impressionable and reckless. Often what seems to them distasteful is in reality a blessing. It is not every love−match that turns out so happily as yours, my dear friends. Well, I suppose I am weak. With Gertrudis I cannot be severe; but unless it becomes necessary to make conditions with my old friend Alfarez, I should prefer to let the girl have her own way."

As Cortlandt escorted his caller to the door, the Panamanian paused and said, with genuine solicitude:

"You look badly, sir. I am afraid you work too hard. I would not easily forgive myself if this affair of ours caused you to fall ill."

"Oh, I am all right—a little tired, that's all. I don't sleep well."

"It is worry over this thing."

Cortlandt smiled crookedly. "I am not the one to worry; I am not the one at the head. Surely you know what people say—that I am her office−boy?"

Garavel found it hard to laugh this off gracefully. "You are too modest," he said. "I admire the trait, but I also chance to know the wonderful things you have accomplished. If people say such things, it is because they do not know and are too small to understand your voluntary position. It is very fine of you to let your wife share your work, senor." But he shook his head as the door closed behind him, really doubting that Cortlandt would prove physically equal to the coming struggle.

It was about this time—perhaps two weeks after Kirk had replied to his father's letter—that Runnels called him in one day to ask:

"Do you know a man named Clifford?"

"No."

"He dropped in this morning, claiming to be a newspaper man from the States; wanted to know all about everything on the Canal and— the usual thing. He didn't talk like a writer, though. I thought you might know him; he asked about you."

"Me?" Kirk pricked up his ears.

"I gathered the impression he was trying to pump me." Runnels eyed his subordinate shrewdly. "I boosted you."

"Is he short and thick−set?"

"No. Tall and thin." As Kirk merely looked at him in a puzzled way, he continued: "I suppose we're all suspicious down here, there's so much of that sort of thing. If he has anything on you— "

"He's got nothing on me."

"I'm glad of that. You're the best man I have, and that shake−up I told you about is coming off sooner than I expected. I'd hate to have anything happen to you. Do you think you could hold down my job?"

"WHAT? Do you really mean it?"

"I do."

"I think I could, if you would help me."

Runnels laughed. "That remark shows you haven't developed Isthmitis, anyhow."

"What is that?"

"Well, it's a sort of mental disorder most of us have. We believe everybody above us is incompetent, and everybody below us is after our jobs. You'll get it in time—even some of the Commissioners have it."

"It goes without saying that I'd like to be Master of Transportation, but not until you're through."

"Well, the old man has had another row with Colonel Jolson, and may not wait for his vacation to quit. I'm promised the vacancy."

"Then you have seen the Colonel?"

"No—but I have seen Mrs. Cortlandt. I felt I had a right to ask something from her in return for what I did for you. I know that sounds rotten, but you'll understand how it is. Colonel Jolson wants his brother−in−law, Blakeley, to have the place, but I'm entitled to it, and she has promised to fix it for me. If I go up, you go, too; that's why I was worried when this Clifford party appeared."

"There IS something, I suppose, I ought to tell you, although it doesn't amount to much. I was mixed up in a scrape the night I left New York. A plain−clothes man happened to get his head under a falling bottle and nearly died from the effects."

"What was the trouble?"

"It really wasn't the least bit of trouble, it was fatally easy. We were out on a grape carnival, six of us. It was an anti− prohibition festival, and he horned in."

"There is nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Well, this Clifford party is stopping at the Hotel Central. Better look him over."

"I will," said Kirk, feeling more concern than he cared to show, but his apprehension turned out to be quite unfounded. On inspection, Clifford proved to bear no resemblance whatever to Williams, nor did he seem to have any concealed design. He was a good sort, apparently, with a knack of making himself agreeable, and in the weeks that followed he and Kirk became quite friendly. Meanwhile, no word had come from Senor Garavel, and Kirk was beginning to fret. But just as he had reached the limit of his patience he received a note which transported him with joy.

Senor Andres Garavel, he read, would be in the city on the following Tuesday evening, and would be pleased to have him call.

Even with his recent experiences of Spanish etiquette, Kirk hardly realized the extent of the concession that had been made to him. He knew nothing of the tears, the pleadings, and the spirited championship of his cause that had overborne the last parental objection. It was lucky for him that Chiquita was a spoiled child, and Garavel a very Americanized Spaniard. However, as it was, he went nearly mad with delight, and when Tuesday came round he performed his office−work so badly that Runnels took him to task.

"What the devil has got into you the last few days?" he exclaimed, irritably.

"I'm going to see a certain party to−night and I can't contain myself. I'm about to blow up. That's all."

"Woman, eh?"

Kirk grinned. "It has taken months, and I'd begun to think I wasn't wanted. Oh, I've had a battle."

"Anybody I know?"

"Yes, but I can't talk about her. There's a man in the case, see! I'm going slow to start with."

Runnels, who had never seen Kirk with any woman except Edith Cortlandt, formed his own conclusions, helped a bit, perhaps, by the memory of that conversation with John Weeks on the day of their ride across the Isthmus. That these conclusions were not pleasing to him, he showed when he returned to his office. He stood an

instant in thought, looking rather stern, then murmured, half aloud: "That's one thing I wouldn't stand for."

Kirk had hard work to refrain from shaving himself twice that evening, so overcareful was he about his toilet, yet his excitement was as nothing compared to that of Allan, who looked on with admiration tempered by anxious criticism. The boy, it seemed, appropriated to himself the entire credit for the happy ending of this affair.

"It will be a grand wedding, sar," he exclaimed. "H'Allan will be there for giving you away."

"You don't know enough about me to give me away," Kirk returned, lightly.

"I shall be needing some h'expensive garments for the ceremony. I would h'ahsk you to be so kind—"

"Not too fast. It hasn't gone quite that far yet."

"But I shall need to have those garments made by a tailor, and that will require time. They will be made precisely to resemble yours, then nobody can tell h'us apart."

"That's considered genuine flattery, I believe."

"Would you do me a favor, Master h'Auntony?"

"Surest thing you know."

"I shall be waiting in the street to−night. Could you h'arrange to h'ahsk those fatal questions h'adjoining the window so that I might h'overhear?"

"NO! And I don't want you prowling around outside, either. You're not to follow me. understand! I have enough on my mind as it is."

The residence of Senor Garavel is considered one of the show places of Panama. It is of Spanish architecture, built of brick and stucco, and embellished with highly ornamental iron balconies. It stands upon a corner overlooking one of the several public squares, guarded from the street by a breast−high stone wall crowned with a stout iron fence. Diagonally opposite and running the full length of the block is a huge weather−stained cathedral, the front of which is decorated with holy figures, each standing by itself in a separate niche. In the open church tower are great chimes which flood the city with melody, and in the corner fronting upon the intersecting street is a tiny shrine with an image of the Madonna smiling downward. It is only a little recess in the wall, with barely room for a few kneeling figures, but at night its bright radiance illumines the darkness round about and lends the spot a certain sanctity.

Contrary to the usual custom, the Garavel mansion has a narrow yard, almost smothered in tropical plants that crowd one another through the iron bars and nod at the passers−by. Riotous vines half screen the balconies: great overhanging red−tiled eaves give the place an air of coziness which the verdure enhances. A subdued light was glowing from the lower windows when Anthony mounted the steps and rang.

An Indian woman, clad in barbarous colors, her bare feet encased in sandals, admitted him, and the banker himself met him in the hall. He led the way into a great barren parlor, where, to Kirk's embarrassment, he found quite a company gathered. His host formally presented him to them, one after another. There were Senor Pedro Garavel, a brother of Andres; Senora Garavel, his wife, who was fat and short of wind; the two Misses Garavel, their daughters; then a little, wrinkled, brown old lady in stiff black silk who spoke no English. Kirk gathered that she was somebody's aunt or grandmother. Last of all, Gertrudis came shyly forward and put her hand in his, then glided back to a seat behind the old lady. Just as they were seating themselves another member of the family appeared—this time a second cousin from Guatemala. Like the grandmother, he was as ignorant of English as Kirk was of Spanish, but he had a pair of frightfully intense black eyes with which he devoured the American. These orbs exercised an unusual effect upon the caller; they were unwinking, the lids were wide open, and the brilliance of the pupils was heightened by the startling whiteness surrounding them. They were like the eyes of a frightened horse.

It was very trying to be the target of so many glances and to know that he was being studied like a bug beneath a microscope, yet Kirk managed to keep a degree of self−possession, making up his mind to display a modest reticence that could not help appearing admirable. But he soon found that this did not suit. Instead of resuming their conversation, the entire assemblage of Garavels waited calmly for their caller to begin, and he realized in a panic that he was expected to make conversation. He cast about madly for a topic.

His host helped him to get started, and he did fairly well until one of the Misses Garavel began to translate his remarks to the old lady and the ferocious cousin from Guatemala. As their replies were not rendered into English, he was left stranded. He knew that his whole salvation lay in properly impressing his auditors, so he began again and floundered through a painful monologue. It was not at all pleasant. It was like being initiated into some secret

order. These strange people sitting so stiff and watchful formed an inquisitorial body. The night suddenly turned off swelteringly hot; perspiration began to trickle down his brow, his collar became a tourniquet, and he cast appealing glances at the silent figure hidden demurely behind the rustly old lady in the black harness. The look of mingled pity and understanding she gave him somewhat revived his fainting spirit, and he determined to stick it out until the family were ready to retire and allow him a word with her alone. But, idle hope! Gradually it dawned upon him that they had no such intention. To relieve the strain, he became facetious and told funny stories; but this was an unlucky experiment, for his witticisms fell with a ghastly hollowness. No one laughed save the grandmother and the Guatemalan cousin, who could not understand, and at this Kirk fled helter−skelter from the realms of humor.

By now his collar had given up the struggle and lain limply down to rest. The whole experience was hideous, yet he understood quite well that these people were not making sport of him. All this was only a part of their foreign customs. They were gentlefolk, reared to a different code from his—that was all—and, since he had elected to come among them, he could only suffer and be strong.

In time he became sufficiently inured to the situation to take in the details of the room, which were truly markable. To begin with, the parlor walls entirely lacked the sort of decoration to which he was used; the furniture, costly and rare in itself, was arranged stiffly in a square about the room, the precise geometrical centre being occupied by a great urn of impressive ugliness. A richly carved mahogany "what−not" against one wall was laden with sea−shells and other curios. At various points about the room were many statuettes, vases, and figures, of every conceivable size and shape—some of bisque, others of common pottery, a few of exquisite marble—all standing upon the floor. A tremendous French chandelier of sparkling crystal cascaded downward from an American ceiling of pressed metal; at regular intervals around the wall were panels painted to resemble marble. Crouched upon a rug in one corner was a life−size figure of what seemed to be a tiger, perfectly colored and made of porcelain. It had tremendous glass eyes, larger even than the cousin's from Guatemala, and they shone with a hypnotic intensity that was disturbing. Kirk wanted to kick it and cry "Scat!" Hidden in other desolate quarters of the room were similar studies in animal life. These anomalous surroundings by turns depressed him and provoked an insane desire to laugh.

What he ever talked about during that evening he never quite remembered. At one time the Cholo girl who had admitted him entered noiselessly, bearing silver plates of fruit, and shortly afterward he found himself trying to balance upon his knee a plate of pineapple soaked in spice and wine, a fork, a napkin starched as stiffly as a sheet of linoleum, and a piece of cake which crumbled at a look. It was a difficult bit of juggling, but he managed to keep one or two of the articles in the air almost continuously.

When it came time to leave he expected at least to be allowed a farewell word or two with Gertrudis, but instead he was bowed out as ceremoniously as he had been bowed in, and, finding himself at last in the open, sighed with relief. He felt like a paroled prisoner, but he thought of the girl's glance of sympathy and was instantly consoled. He crossed slowly to the Plaza, pausing a moment for a good−night look at the house, then, as he turned, he caught a glimpse of a figure slinking into the shadows of the side−street, and smiled indulgently. Evidently Allan had been unable to resist the temptation to follow, after all, and had hung about hoping to overhear his hero at his best. But when he had reached his quarters he was surprised to find the boy there ahead of him.

"How did you beat me home?" he inquired.

"I have been waiting h'impatiently ever since you went out. To be sure, I have had one little dream—"

"Didn't you follow me to the Garavels'?"

"Oh, boss! Never would I do such."

Seeing that the negro was honest, Kirk decided that somebody had been spying upon him, but the matter was of so little consequence that he dismissed it from his mind.

"And what said your female upon your proposal of marriage?" Allan inquired. "Praise God, I shall h'expire of suspense if you do not cha−at me the truth."

"Oh, there was a chorus of her relatives in the room. They sat in my lap all the evening. '

"Perhaps it is fartunate, after all. This senorita is rich 'ooman, and therefar she would be h'expensive for us."

Kirk managed to drive him forth after some effort, and straightway retired to dream of timid Spanish girls who peeped at him from behind old ladies, porcelain tigers that laughed inanely at his jokes, and Guatemalan

gentlemen with huge hypnotic eyes of glass.

XXII. A CHALLENGE AND A CONFESSION

Although Runnels had spoken with confidence of the coming shake−up in the railroad organization, it was not without a certain surprise that he awoke one morning to find himself actively in charge of the entire system. He lost no time in sending for Kirk, who took the news of their joint advancement with characteristic equanimity.

"Now, there is nothing cinched yet, understand," the Acting Superintendent cautioned him. "We're all on probation, but if we make good, I think we'll stick."

"I'll do my best to fill your shoes."

"And I have the inside track on Blakeley, in spite of Colonel Jolson, so I'm not alarmed. The break came sooner than I expected, and now that we chaps are in control it's the chance of our lifetimes."

Kirk nodded. "You're entitled to all you get, but I've never quite understood how I managed to forge ahead so fast. Why, there are dozens of fellows here who know more than I, and who could do better. I've been mighty lucky."

"You don't really call it luck, do you?" Runnels looked at him curiously.

"I'm not conceited enough to think I'm a downright genius."

"Why, the Cortlandts engineered everything. It was they who arranged your promotion to the office in the first place, and they're behind this last affair. They have stood back of you at every step, and, incidentally; back of me and the other boys."

"When you say 'they' you of course mean 'she'."

"Of course. One has to recognize him, though—as the head of the family. And he really did have a part in it, too; at least, if he had been against us we never would have won."

"I can't pretend that I didn't suspect," said Kirk slowly, "but I did hope I'd made good on my own merits."

Runnels laughed. "You have made good all right, or you couldn't go forward; but this is a government job, and fellows like us aren't big enough to get through on our own merits. One has to be a real world−beater to do that. If the Cortlandts hadn't backed us, some other chaps with influence would have stepped in above us. Take Blakeley, for instance. He is nothing extra, and he doesn't know half as much about this business as I do; but he's the brother−in− law of Colonel Jolson, and he'd have landed the job sure if it hadn't been for our friends. You'd better let your conscience take a nap."

"I'd like to show the Cortlandts that we appreciate what they've done, but we can't openly thank her without humiliating him. I'd like to give him something."

"Suppose we give him a quiet little supper, some night, and tell him frankly how grateful we are. He's the sort to appreciate a thing like that, and it would be a delicate way of thanking his wife, too."

"Good! I'll speak to the other fellows, and now the Acting Master of Transportation is going to shake with the new Acting Superintendent, and wish him every success."

Runnels grasped the outstretched hand.

"Say, Anthony," he said, "we're young and we have a start. I have what you lack, and you have what I lack; if we stick together, we'll own a railroad some day. Is it a go?"

"You bet!"

With a warm glow in his breast, the new Master of Transportation plunged into his duties. He really was making a success, it seemed, although it was a bit disappointing to learn that he owed so much of it to Edith Cortlandt. At the same time he couldn't help thinking that his efforts had entitled him to reasonable success, and, anyhow, it was pleasant to feel that at no point in his scramble up the ladder had he elbowed off some other man more deserving, perhaps, than he. This last advancement, too, was very timely, for it would surely have its effect upon Andres Garavel.

But his new work brought new troubles and worries. Runnels helped him whenever he could, yet Kirk was left largely to his own devices, and learned for the first time what real responsibility was like. He began to sleep shorter hours; he concentrated with every atom of determination in him; he drove himself with an iron hand. He attacked his task from every angle, and with his fine constitution and unbounded youthful energy he covered an amazing quantity of work. He covered it so well, moreover, that Runnels complimented him.

This stress of labor served one purpose for which he was very grateful; it separated him from Edith Cortlandt and took his mind from that occurrence in the jungle. Ever since the day of his last ride with her, he had been tortured with the most unpleasant thoughts. He confessed to forgetting himself briefly that night at Taboga, but he had believed that she understood—that she regarded him only as a chum and a companion. Therefore her open surrender, coming so unexpectedly had dumfounded him. As he looked back upon the incident now, it seemed inconceivable, yet her words, her expression, her reckless abandon at that moment, were too significant to allow of misunderstanding. Still, by dint of determination and stern attention to his tasks, he was able to put the matter almost wholly from his mind.

Soon after his promotion he received from Andres Garavel a warmly worded note of congratulation, and some few days later an invitation to dine, which he accepted eagerly.

The dinner proved to be another disappointing ordeal, for again he was allowed no opportunity of speaking with Gertrudis, and had to content himself with feasting his eyes upon her. But although the family were present en masse, as on the former occasion, they unbent to a surprising degree, and he found them truly gracious and delightful. He realized, nevertheless, that he was under the closest scrutiny and upon the strictest probation. The Garavels still held him at a noticeable distance, and he was far from feeling wholly at ease.

Later in the evening he found himself alone with Chiquita and the old Spanish lady, and, knowing that the latter could not understand a word of his tongue, he addressed himself to the girl with some degree of naturalness.

"I was sorry for you the last time, senor," she said, in reply to his half−humorous complaint, "and yet it was fonny; you were so frightened,"

"It was my first memorial service. I thought I was going to see you alone."

"Oh, that is never allowed."

"Never? How am I going to ask you to marry me?"

Miss Garavel hid her blushing face behind her fan. "Indeed! You seem capable of asking that absurd question under any circumstances."

"I wish you would straighten me out on some of your customs."

"What, for instance?"

"Why does the whole family sit around and watch me? I don't intend to steal any bric−a−brac. They could search me just as well when I go out."

"They wish to satisfy themselves as to your character, perhaps."

"Yes, but a fellow feels guilty causing them to lose so much sleep."

She gave him an odd look, smiling timidly.

"As for to−night, do you attribute any meaning to my father's request that you dine with us?"

"Of course. It means I wasn't blackballed at the first meeting, I suppose. After I've become a regular member, and there is nothing missed from the lodgerooms, I'll be allowed to proceed in the ordinary manner."

She blushed delightfully again. "Since you are so ignorant of our ways you should inquire at your earliest convenience. I would advise you, perhaps, to learn Spanish."

"Will you teach me? I'll come every evening."

She did not answer, for the old lady began to show curiosity, and a conversation in Spanish ensued which Kirk could not follow.

When it came time for their chaperon to leave, she excused herself with royal dignity, and, going to the door, called Stephanie, the giant St. Lucian woman. Not until the negress had entered did the grandmother retire, which showed, so Kirk imagined, that even yet the Garavel household had no more confidence in him than in a badgeless building inspector. He was not grateful for the change, for he did not like Stephanie, and, judging from the sombre suspicion of the black woman's glances, the feeling was mutual. The conversation took perforce a less personal nature in her presence, yet Kirk departed with a feeling of exaltation. Beyond doubt his suit was progressing, slowly, perhaps, but still progressing.

His understanding of Spanish customs received a considerable enlargement on the following day, when he met Ramon Alfarez outside the railroad office. Ramon had evidently waited purposely for him, and now began to voice some unintelligible protest in the greatest excitement.

"You'll have to play it all over again," Kirk advised him. "I'm only just learning to conjugate the verb 'amar.' What seems to be the trouble this time?"

"Ha! For the moment I forgot your ignorance, but onderstan' this, detestable person, it is time you shall answer to me."

"Cheerfully! Ask your questions slowly."

"Onderstan' further," chattered the Spaniard, "regardless of the 'appenings to me, it shall never come to pass. Soch disgraceful occurrence shall never transpire; of that be assure', even if it exac' the las' drops of blood in the veins of me. I 'ave despised you, senor, an' so I 'ave neglec' to keel you, being busy with important affairs of government. Bot, 'ow am I reward for those neglec'? Eh!" Alfarez breathed ferociously through his nostrils.

"I don't know, I'm sure. What is your reward?"

"Very well are you aware, PIG."

"Nix on those pet names," the American ordered, gruffly.

"You 'ave insolt me," cried Ramon, furiously, "and now you 'ave the insolence to interfere in my affairs." He paused dramatically. "Make it yourself ready to fight on to−morrow."

"What's the use of putting it off? I couldn't make your weight in that time. I'll do it now, if you say."

"No, no! Onderstan' we shall fight like gentlemen. I shall keel you with any weapon you prefer."

"By Jove!" Kirk exclaimed, in amazement. "This is a challenge; you want to fight a duel! Why, this reads like a book." He began to laugh, at which Ramon became white and calm. "Listen," Kirk went on, "I'll tell you what we'll do; we'll fight with fire−hose again. I suppose you want satisfaction for that ducking."

"I prefer to shoot you, senor," the other declared, quietly. "Those marriage shall never occur until first I walk upon your dead body. As matter of honor I offer you this opportunity biffore it is too late."

"I guess you have been drinking. You're a little premature in talking about my marriage, aren't you?"

"So! You fear to confess the truth! Oh, I am not to be deceive'. All Panama is speaking of those engagements to Senorita Garavel. Come, then, must I insolt you further?"

Kirk replied, dryly, looking the Spaniard over with, cold blue eyes. "No! I think you've gone about far enough."

"You riffuse?" exclaimed Ramon, triumphantly.

"Look here!" said Kirk, "I've had enough of this." He advanced threateningly, and the Spaniard nervously gave way. "I don't fight duels; it's against the law. In my country it's a crime to kill a man in cold blood; and we don't tie a fellow up and beat him when he's helpless and then offer him the HONORABLE satisfaction of either committing murder or being killed. They're not wearing duels this season." His hands clenched involuntarily. "I don't want to hurt you, Alfarez, but I may not be able to help it if you don't keep out of my way."

He left the fiery little Panamanian still scowling and muttering threats, and went his way wondering vaguely how his attentions to Chiquita had become so quickly known. He was informed later in the afternoon.

As he left the office for the day he was handed a note from Mrs. Cortlandt requesting him to call at once, and, summoning a coach, he was driven directly to her house. Unlike the Garavel home, the house which the Cortlandts had leased was set upon the water− front, its rear balcony overlooking the sea where it lapped the foundation of the city wall. It was a delightful old place, shut off from the street by a yard filled with flowering plants and shrubs, and, though flanked in true Spanish fashion by stores and shops, it was roomy and comfortable.

Edith kept him waiting a moment before she descended, dressed for her afternoon ride.

"You see, I haven't given up my horse in spite of your neglect," she said, as she gave him her hand, "You got my note?"

"Yes, and I came straight from the office."

"I suppose you know what it is about and are wondering how I heard the news."

"What news?"

"Your 'engagement.'" She laughed with an amusement that did not ring quite true.

"You're the second one to speak about that. I'm not engaged."

"Of course not. Don't think for a moment I believed it. I was calling on some Spanish people this afternoon and heard the report—I admit it was a shock. When I learned the details I knew at once you ought to be told before it developed into something embarrassing. Come into the other room; there is a breeze from the water." She led him into the parlor, from which the open windows, shielded now by drawn shutters, gave egress to the rear porch with its chairs and hammock.

"Dear, dear! You foolish boy, you're always in trouble, aren't you? You really don't deserve to be helped.

Why, you have avoided me for weeks."

"The new arrangement has swamped us with work. I have had no time to go out."

"Indeed! You had time to run after the first pretty Spanish face you saw. I'm really angry, though I suppose I can't blame you. After all, she is charming, in her way."

"You mean Miss Garavel?"

"Yes. Didn't you realize what you were doing?"

"I realized what I was trying to do."

"Naughty! But why select her of all people? There are dozens of others who could amuse you and whose people would not object. Andres Garavel isn't that sort; he is a rich man, he has political ambitions, he's a very proud sort. Now, I suppose I must get you out of this difficulty as best I can. You ought to be more careful."

"Please!" he said, crossly. "I could understand better what you are talking about if I knew just what this difficulty is."

"Why, this silly 'engagement' of yours. Don't pretend to be so stupid."

"Ramon Alfarez heard that same report, and very courteously invited me to wait a few minutes while he killed me. It's tremendously flattering to be linked up with Miss Garavel, of course, but I haven't asked her to marry me."

"But you've seen her; you have called at her house!"

"Sure! Twice; at the invitation of the old gentleman. All the little Garavels were lined up like mourners."

"And you dined there last night. Is that all you have seen of her?"

"N−no! I've seen her at Las Savannas. That's why I went hunting so often."

At this confession, which Kirk delivered with sheepish reluctance, Mrs. Cortlandt drew herself up with an expression of anger.

"Then this has been going on for some time," she cried. "Why, Kirk, you never told me!"

"Why should I?"

She flushed at this unconscious brutality, but after a moment ran on bravely; "Oh, well, I suppose any man would enjoy that sort of an adventure, particularly with such a pretty girl, but why did you let it go so far? Why did you let them commit you?"

"Am I committed?"

Her look was half offended, half incredulous. "Are you trying to be disagreeable, or is it possible you don't know the meaning of those invitations to call, and to dine with the family, and all that? Why, they expect you to MARRY her. It is all settled now, according to the Spanish custom. The whole town is talking about it, I can't understand, for the life of me, how you ever allowed yourself to go there the second time and to DINE." Seeing the look in his face, she cried, sharply, "You don't mean—that you're in earnest?" She was staring at him as if disbelieving her eyes.

"Certainly, I'm in earnest."

Edith turned away abruptly.

"I hope you're not joking," said Kirk. "Jove! I—I'm knocked clear off my pins." A tremendous wave of excitement surged over him. "So, that's what Alfarez meant. That's what SHE meant last night when she told me to look up—" He broke off suddenly, for Edith's face had gone chalk−white.

"But, Kirk, what about me?" she asked, in a strained voice.

There was deathlike silence in the room.

"You can't LOVE her," said the woman. "Why, she's only a child, and she's—Spanish."

They stood motionless, facing each other. At last Kirk said, gravely and deliberately

"Yes, I love her better than anything in the world and I want to marry her. I could give up my country, my dad—anything for her."

Pressing her gloved fingers to her temples she turned her head blindly from side to side, whispering as if to herself:

"What will become of me?"

"Don't," he cried, in a panic, and cast a hurried look over his shoulders. "You'll be overheard—you'll be seen. You don't know what you're saying. Where's Cortlandt?"

"At his club, I suppose. I don't know—I—I don't care." Then the paralysis that had numbed her vanished, and

she spoke with quivering intensity. "You've been dishonest with me, Kirk."

"Don't act this way," he ordered, roughly. "I'm terribly fond of you, but I never knew—"

"You MUST have known."

"I knew NOTHING. I chose not to think. What I saw I forgot. I supposed you merely liked me as I liked you."

"That night at Taboga!" she flared up. "What about that? Couldn't you tell then? I fought—fought—fought—but I had to give up. You haven't forgotten—those wonderful hours we had together?" She began to sob, but steadied herself with an effort. "You say you didn't know, then what about that afternoon in the jungle? Oh, you're not blind; you must have seen a thousand times. Every hour we've been alone together I've told you, and you let me go on believing you cared. Do you think that was right? Now you are shocked because I admit it," she mocked. "Well, I have no pride. I am not ashamed. It's too late for shame now. Why, even my husband knows."

With an exclamation he seized her by the arm. "You don't mean that!" he cried, fiercely. But she wrenched herself away.

"Why, do you think, I made a man of you? Why did I force you up and up and over the heads of others? Why are you in line for the best position on the railroad? Did you think you had made good by your own efforts?" She laughed harshly. "I took Runnels and Wade and Kimble and the others that you liked and forced them up with you, so you'd have an organization that couldn't be pulled down."

"Did—did you do all that?"

"I did more. I broke with Alfarez because of what his son did to you. I juggled the politics of this country, I threw him over and took Garavel—Garavel! My God! What a mockery! But I won't let you—I won't let that girl spoil my work." Her voice trailed off in a kind of rasping whisper. She struggled a moment for composure, then went on: "It was I who promoted you to Runnels' position—he'll tell you that. It was I who put ideas of advancement into his head. I fostered this quarrel between Jolson and the Superintendent, and I've used Runnels to break trail for you. Why? Ask yourself why! Oh, Kirk," she cried, "you mustn't marry that girl! I'll make you a great man!"

"You seem to forget Cortlandt," he said, dully.

She gave a scornful laugh. "You needn't bring Stephen in. He doesn't count. I doubt if he'd even care. Our marriage amounts to nothing—nothing. You'd better consider ME, and the sacrifice I'm willing to make."

"I'm not going to listen to you," he cried. "I suppose I've been a fool, but this must end right here."

"You can't marry that girl," she reiterated, hysterically. She was half sobbing again, but not with the weakness of a woman; her grief was more like that of a despairing man.

"For Heaven's sake, pull yourself together," said Kirk. "You have servants. I—I don't know what to say. I want to get out, I want to think it over. I'm—dreadully sorry. That's all I can seem to think about now." He turned and went blindly to the door, leaving her without a look behind.

When he had gone she drew off her riding−gloves, removed her hat, and dropped them both upon the nearest chair, then crept wearily up the stairs to her room.

A moment later the latticed wooden blinds at the end of the parlor swung open, and through the front window stepped Stephen Cortlandt. Behind him was a hammock swung in the coolest part of the balcony. The pupils of his eyes, ordinarily so dead and expressionless, were distended like those of a man under the influence of a drug or suffering from a violent headache. He listened attentively for an instant, his head on one side, then, hearing footsteps approaching from the rear of the house, he strolled into the hall.

A maid appeared with a tray, a glass, and a bottle. "I could not find the aspirin," she said, "but I brought you some absinthe. It will deaden the pain, sir."

He thanked her and with shaking fingers poured the glass full, then drank it off like so much water.

"You're not going out again in the heat, sir?"

"Yes. Tell Mrs. Cortlandt that I am dining at the University Club." He went slowly down the steps and out through the flowering shrubs.

XXIII. A PLOT AND A SACRIFICE

Kirk never passed a more unpleasant night than the one which followed. In the morning he went straight to Runnels with the statement that he could take no part in the little testimonial they had intended to give Cortlandt.

"But it's too late now to back out. I saw him at the University Club last evening and fixed the date for Saturday night."

"Did you tell him I was in the affair?"

"Certainly. I said it was your idea. It affected him deeply, too. I never saw a chap so moved over a little thing."

Kirk thought quickly. Perhaps Edith had spoken rashly in her excitement, and her husband did not know her feelings after all. Perhaps he only suspected. In that case it would never do to withdraw. It would seem like a confession of guilt.

"If he has accepted, that ends it, I suppose," he said, finally.

"What has happened?" Runnels was watching him sharply.

"Nothing. I merely wish I hadn't entered into the arrangement, that's all. I've ordered a watch for him, too, and it's being engraved. I wanted to give him something to show my own personal gratitude for what he and his wife have done for me. Lord! It took a month's salary. I know it's a jay present, but there's nothing decent in these shops."

"Look here! I've wanted to say something to you for some time, though it's deuced hard to speak of such things. Maybe I have more moral scruples than some people, but—" Runnels stirred uncomfortably in his chair. "Steve Cortlandt has put us where we are—you understand, when I speak of him I include his wife, too. Well, I like him, Kirk, and I'd hate to see him made unhappy. If a chap loves a married woman, he ought to be man enough to forget it. Rotten way to express myself, of course—"

Kirk looked the speaker squarely in the eyes as he answered: "I don't understand what you're driving at. I haven't the least interest in any married man's affairs—never have had, in fact. I'm in love with Gertrudis Garavel, and I'm engaged to marry her."

"The devil!"

"It's a fact. I didn't know until last night that I'd been accepted."

"Then just forget what I said. I was going north on a south−bound track—I ran ahead of orders. I really do congratulate you, old man; Miss Garavel is—well, I won't try to do her justice—I had no idea. Please pardon me."

"Certainly! Now that it's settled I'm not going to let any grass grow under my feet."

"Why, say! Garavel is to be the next President! Jove! You ARE lucky! Cortlandt told me last night that the old fellow's candidacy was to be announced Saturday night at the big ball; that's how he came to accept our invitation. He said his work would be over by then and he'd be glad to join us after the dance. Well, well! Your future wife and father−in−law are to be his guests that night, I suppose you know."

"Then they have patched up a truce with Alfarez? I'm glad to hear that."

"It's all settled, I believe. This dance is a big special event. The American Minister and the various diplomatic gangs will be there, besides the prominent Spanish people. It's precisely the moment to launch the Garavel boom, and Cortlandt intends to do it. After it's over, our little crowd will have supper and thank him for what he has done for us. Oh, it will be a big night all around, won't it? Do you realize the skyrockety nature of your progress, young man? Lord! You take my breath."

"It does seem like a dream. I landed here with a button−hook for baggage, and now—Say, Runnels, her eyes are just like two big black pansies, and when she smiles you'll go off your trolley."

"Your promotion came just in time, didn't it? Talk about luck! We ought to hear from Washington before Saturday and know that our jobs are cinched. This uncertainty is fierce for me. You know I have a wife and kid, and it means a lot. When you give Cortlandt that watch you'll have to present him with a loving−cup from the rest of us. I think it's coming to him, don't you?"

"I—I'd rather you presented it."

"Not much! I can run trains, but I can't engineer social functions. You'll have to be spokesman. I suppose jobs

and increased salaries and preferments, and all that, don't count for much with a young fellow who is engaged to the fabulous Miss Garavel, but with the Runnels family it's different. Meanwhile, let's just hold our thumbs till our promotions are ratified from headquarters. I need that position, and I'm dying of uneasiness."

The night had been as hard for Edith Cortlandt as it had been for Kirk, but during its sleepless hours she had reached a determination. She was not naturally revengeful, but it was characteristic of her that she could not endure failure. Action, not words or tears, was the natural outlet of her feelings. There was just one possible way of winning Kirk back, and if instead it ruined him she would be only undoing what she had mistakenly done. As soon after breakfast as she knew definitely that her husband had gone out, she telephoned to General Alfarez, making an appointment to call on him at eleven.

It was the first time she had ever gone to see him, for she was in the habit of bringing people to her, but this was no ordinary occasion, and she knew the crafty old Spaniard would be awaiting her with eagerness.

Her interview with him was short, however, and when she emerged from his house she ordered the coachman to drive directly to the Garavel Bank. This time she stayed longer, closeted with the proprietor. What she told him threw him into something like a panic. It seemed that Anibal Alfarez was by no means so well reconciled to the death of his political hopes as had been supposed. On the contrary, in spite of all that had been done to prevent it, he had been working secretly and had perfected the preliminaries of a coup which he intended to spring at the eleventh hour. Through Ramon, he had brought about an alliance with the outgoing Galleo, and intended to make the bitterest possible fight against Garavel. Such joining of forces meant serious trouble, and until the banker's position was materially strengthened it would be most unwise to announce his candidacy as had been planned. The General had worked with remarkable craftiness, according to Mrs. Cortlandt's account, and Galleo's grip upon the National Assembly was so strong as to threaten all their schemes. She did not go into minute details—there was no need, for the banker's fears took fire at the mere fact that Alfarez had revolted. He was dumfounded, appalled.

"But it was only last week that we were assured that all was well," he cried in despair.

She shrugged her shoulders. "One is privileged to change his mind overnight, I suppose. Politics is not a child's game."

"Oh, I am sorry I ever entertained the proposal. To be defeated now would do me immeasurable harm, not only in my pride, but in my business affairs. My affiliations with the government are of the closest—they must be, for me to live. To be a candidate, to make the fight, and to be beaten! What consideration will come to the firm of Garavel Hermanos, think you?"

"Not much, but you are not so deeply committed that you cannot withdraw."

This cool suggestion brought the expected outburst. "Rather than such a disgrace," cried Garavel, "I would go to certain defeat. One's pride is not for sale, madame. What has caused this so sudden change of sentiment?"

"Ramon is partly to blame. He is just as proud as you or as his father. When he heard of your daughter's engagement to our friend Anthony—"

"Ah! Now I see it all." His face darkened. "So, this is my reward for heeding your advice in regard to Gertrudis. She should have wed Ramon, as was intended, then I would have had a lever with which to lift his father from my path. Very well, then, there is no engagement with this Anthony. It may not be too late even yet to capture Ramon."

"The city is already talking about Gertrudis and Kirk."

"No word has been spoken, no promise given. There is not even an understanding. It is merely an old custom that has caused this report. He seemed a pleasant fellow, she had dreams, so—I yielded. But do you suppose I would allow my great ambition to be thwarted by the whim of a girl—to be upset by a stranger's smile? Bah! At their age I loved a dozen. I could not survive without them." He snapped his fingers. "You see now the truth of what I told you when we first spoke of my daughter. It is the older heads that must govern, always. I should have foreseen this effect, but Ramon was offended, and he said too little. Now, I admire his spirit; he is desperate; he will fight; he is no parrot to sit by and see his cage robbed. So much the better, since he is the pivot upon which this great affair revolves. You see what must be done?"

"Certainly."

"Come! We will see my friend Anibal at once."

But Mrs. Cortlandt checked him, saying, quietly:

"That is all right as far as it goes, but you forget the other young man."

Garavel paused in his heavy strides across the room.

"Eh? How so? Gertrudis will not marry this Anthony."

"Perhaps she loves him."

"Love is a fancy, a something seen through a distant haze, an illusion which vanishes with the sun. In a month, a year, she will have forgotten; but with me it is different. This is my life's climax; there will be no other. I am a Garavel; I have looked into the future and I cannot turn back. I think also of Panama herself. There are great issues at stake."

"But how will you handle Anthony?"

Garavel looked at her blankly. "He is in my way. He is ended! Is not that all?"

"I am glad you are practical; so many of you Latin−Americans are absurdly romantic."

"And why should I not be practical? I am a business man. I love but two things, madame—no, three: my daughter, my success, and— my country. By this course I will serve all three."

"Since you take this view of it, I am sure that with Ramon's help we can dissuade Don Anibal from his course. The General is sensible, and doesn't want a fight any more than you do. If your daughter will consent—"

"My dear lady, give yourself no uneasiness. She does not know the meaning of rebellion. If necessary—but there is not the slightest question. It is done."

"Then let me look up Ramon. He and I will approach the General together." She gave him her neatly gloved hand. "Things are never so bad as they seem."

"And I thank you for your promptness, which alone, perhaps, has saved our hopes and our ambitions." He escorted his caller to her carriage, then hurriedly returned to his office.

That afternoon Kirk received a formal communication from the banker which filled him with dismay. It ran:

MY DEAR MR. ANTHONY,—To my extreme distress, I hear a rumor that Gertrudis is to become your wife. I assure you that neither she nor I blame you in the least for this unfortunate report; but since busy tongues will wag upon the slightest excuse, we feel it best that no further occasion for gossip should be given, I am sure you will co−operate with us.

Sincerely and respectfully, your friend, ANDRES GARAVEL.

A sense of betrayal crept over him as he read. What the letter signified, beyond the fact that Mr. Garavel had changed his mind, he could not make out, and he resolved to go at once and demand an explanation. But at the bank he was told that the proprietor had gone home, and he drove to the house only to learn that Senor Garavel and his daughter had left for Las Savannas not half an hour before. So, back through the city he urged his driver, across the bridge, and out along the country road.

Darkness had settled when he returned, raging at the trickery that had been practised upon him. If they thought to gain their point by sending him on wildgoose chases like this, they were greatly mistaken. He proposed to have Chiquita now, if he had to burst his way to her through barred doors. Never in all his easy, careless life had anything of moment been denied him, never had he felt such bitterness of thwarted longing. Reared in a way to foster a disregard of all restraint and a contempt for other people's rights, he was in a fitting mood for any reckless project, and the mere thought that they should undertake to coerce an Anthony filled him with grim amusement. He had yielded to their left− handed customs out of courtesy; it was time now to show his strength.

What folly he might have committed it is hard to tell, but he was prevented from putting any extravagant plan into operation by a message from the girl herself.

As he dismissed his coachman and turned toward his quarters, Stephanie came to him out of the shadows.

"I have been waiting," she said.

"Where is Chiquita? Tell me quickly."

"She is at the house. She wants to see you."

"Of course she does. I knew this wasn't any of her doing. I've been hunting everywhere for her."

"At nine o'clock she will be in the Plaza. You know the dark place across from the church?"

"I'll be there."

"If we do not come, wait."

"Certainly. But, Stephanie, tell me what it is all about?"

The black woman shook her head. "She is sick," she said, in a harsh voice, "that is all I know. I have never

seen her act so." From her expression Kirk fancied that she held him responsible for her mistress's sufferings.

"Now, don't be angry with me," he made haste to say. "I'm sick, too, and you're the only friend we have. You love her, don't you? Well, so do I. and I'm going to make her happy in spite of her father and all the rest. Run along now, I won't keep you waiting to−night."

Long before the appointed time he was at the place of meeting, but scarcely had the city chimes rung out nine when he saw two women emerge from the dark side−street next the Garavel mansion and come swiftly toward him.

He refrained from rushing out to meet them, but when they were close to his place of concealment he stepped forward, with Chiquita's name upon his lips and his arms outstretched. She drew away.

"No, no, senor!" she cried. "I sent for you because there was no other way—that is all. My father would not let you come to the house. You will not think me bold?"

"Of course not."

"I could not let you go until you knew the truth. You do not— believe it was my fault?"

"I don't know what to believe, because I don't know what has happened. All I know is that I got a note from your father. But that won't make me let you go."

She clung desperately to the Bajan woman as if afraid to trust herself near him. "Wait—wait," she said, "until you have heard it all."

Never had she appeared so beautiful as now, with her face white, her bosom heaving, as the half−light dimly revealed.

"No matter what it is, I'll never give you up," he declared, stubbornly.

"Ah! I feared you would say those very words; but you must do it, just the same. It will be hard for us both, I know—but—" She choked and shook her head as the words refused to come.

Stephanie laid a great copper hand soothingly upon her shoulder, and growled at Kirk in a hoarse, accusing voice:

"You see?"

"Tell me first why I must give you up?"

"Because, in spite of all, I am to marry Ramon," Gertrudis said, wretchedly.

"Who said so?"

"My father. He has forbidden me to think of you, and ordered that I marry Ramon. Sick or well, living or dead, I must marry him."

"I'm hanged if you do!"

"It is those miserable politics again. If I do not obey, my father cannot be President, do you see?" Pausing an instant to master her agitation, she hurried on. "To be President means a great deal to him and to our family; it is the greatest honor that has ever come to a Garavel. Senor Alfarez is terribly angry that I refused to marry his son, to whom since I was a little child I have been engaged. Ramon also is furious; he threatened to kill himself. So, it comes to this then: if I will not bind myself to the agreement, Senor Alfarez will contest the election—I do not know how you say those things—but my father will be defeated—perhaps he will be humbled. Many other terrible things which I cannot understand will happen also. If I agree, then there will be no opposition to his plans. He will be President, and I will be a grand lady."

"I won't stand for it. They're making you a sacrifice, that's all. What kind of a father is it who would sell his daughter—"

"No, no! You do not understand. He is proud, he cannot accept defeat, he would rather give his life than be humiliated. Furthermore—he wishes me to marry Ramon, and so that ends it." Her lips were trembling as she peered up at him to see if he really understood.

"Let them rave, dear. What does it matter who is President? What does anything matter to you and me?"

"He says I am too young to know my own mind, and—perhaps that is true, Senor Antonio; perhaps I shall soon forget you and learn to love Ramon as he loves me, I do not know—"

In spite of the pathetic quaver in her voice, Kirk cried with jealous bitterness:

"You don't seem to object very strongly; you seem to care about as much for Alfarez as you do for me. Is that it?"

"Yes, senor," she said, bravely,

"You are lying!" declared Stephanie, suddenly.

The girl burst into a perfect torrent of weeping that shamed him. Then, without any invitation, she flung herself recklessly into his arms and lay there, trembling, palpitating like an imprisoned bird. "Forgive me, dear," he exclaimed, softly. "I knew better all the time. You mustn't think of doing what they ask; I won't allow it." His own heart−beats were shaking him, and he hardly knew what he was saying. The sight of her grief maddened him. It was as if they had taken advantage of his helpless little maid to hurt her maliciously, and his indignation blazed forth. She looked up with eyes gleaming through her tears and said, brokenly:

"Senor, I love you truly. You see, I cannot lie."

Her breath intoxicated him, and he bent his head to kiss her, but Stephanie tore her roughly from his arms. The woman showed the strength of a man, and her vulture−like face was working fiercely as she cried:

"No! She is mine! She is mine! She is a good girl."

"Stephanie! She loves me, don't you see?"

"No, no!" The black woman drew the girl into the shelter of her own arms.

"Oh, I am wicked," Gertrudis said. "I love you, Keerk—yes, I love you very dearly, but my father—he refuses—I must obey—he has the right, and I must do as he wishes."

"Come with me now. We'll be married to−night," he urged; but she only clung to Stephanie more closely, as if to hold herself from falling.

"You are very sweet to me," she said, with piteous tenderness, "and I shall never forget the honor; but you see I cannot. This is more to my father than his life; it is the same to all our family, and I must do my duty. I will pray for strength to keep from loving you, senor, and some day, perhaps, the dear God will hear. You must do likewise, and pray also for me to have courage, I could not let you go away thinking this was my doing, so I sent for you. No, one must obey one's people, for they are wise—and good. But one should be honest."

The tears were stealing down her cheeks, and she thrilled to his pleadings as to some wondrous music, yet she was like adamant, and all his lover's desperation could not shake her. It was strange to see this slender, timid slip of a girl so melting and yet so cruelly firm. He appealed to Stephanie, but she was as unresponsive as a bronze image. Seeing that his urging only made matters worse, he said, more gently:

"You are exalted now with the spirit of self−sacrifice, but later you will see that I am right. I am not discouraged. A thousand things may happen. Who knows what to−morrow may bring? Let's wait and see if we can't find a way out. Now that I know you love me, I have the courage to face anything, and I am going to win you, Chiquita. I have never lost in all my life, and I don't intend to begin now. I'll see your father in the morning, and I'll be here again, to−morrow night—"

But at this Gertrudis cried out: "No, no! I cannot meet you again in this manner." And Stephanie nodded her agreement.

"Then I'll see you the next night, that is Saturday. You are coming to the big ball at the Tivoli with him and the Cortlandts— I must see you then, so make sure to be there, and meanwhile don't give up."

"Oh, there is no hope."

"There is always hope. I'll think of something."

"We must go," said the Barbadian woman, warningly.

"Yes, yes! It is of no avail to resist," came the girl's choking voice. She stretched out her little hand, and then, looking up at him, said, uncertainly: "I—may never speak with you again alone, senor, and I must pray to—cease loving you; but will you—kiss me once so that I may never forget?"

He breathed a tender exclamation and took her gently to his breast, while the negress stood by scowling and muttering.

The memory of that long, breathless moment lived with him for years. Strangely enough, at the touch of her lips he felt his courage forsake him—it ran out like water. He became weak, fearful, despairing, as if it were his life that was ebbing away. And the pang when she drew herself from him was like a bayonet− thrust. Even when she and Stephanie had melted into the shadows, he stood motionless under the spell of that caress, its ecstasy still suffusing him.

He found himself following slowly in the direction they had taken in the hope of catching just one more glimpse of her, but as he emerged from the darkness of the park he paused. There across the street, in the little open shrine set in the corner of the great cathedral, she was kneeling before the shining figure of the Madonna.

The candle−glow that illumined the holy image and shone out so hopefully against the gloom showed her crouched close before the altar, her dark head bowed in uttermost dejection. Outside, and barely revealed, stood the tall, gaunt Bajan woman, silent, watchful, and forbidding.

With a painful grip at his throat Kirk watched until the girl rose and hurried away into the shadows. Then he, too, turned and made his way up the street, but he went slowly, unseeingly, as if he had beheld a vision.

For the first time in his life he was a prey to fear. A thousand panics clamored at him, his mind began working with the exaggerated speed of a person in dire peril. Once more, as upon that night when he had first called at her father's house, he turned abruptly at the corner to stare at her window, and again he surprised a figure skulking after him. Without a moment's hesitation he made after it at a run, but the fellow dodged into the Plaza and disappeared among the shrubbery. Not caring to pursue the chase into those lurking shadows Kirk desisted, certain only of one thing—that he was not Allan who was trailing him. He recalled the oft−repeated threats of Ramon Alfarez, and returned to his quarters by way of the lighted thoroughfares.

XXIV. A BUSINESS PROPOSITION

Edith Cortlandt's interview with the rival candidates for the Panamanian Presidency formed but a part of her plan. She next held a long conversation with Colonel Jolson, to the end that on Friday morning Runnels heard a rumor that threw him into the greatest consternation. It was to the effect that instead of his succeeding to the office of Superintendent, he was to retain his old post, and that Colonel Jolson's brother−in−law was to supersede him. Although the word was not authoritative, it came with sufficient directness to leave him aghast. If true, it was, of course, equivalent to his discharge, for it meant that he could not even continue in his former position without putting himself in a light intolerable to any man of spirit. Since he was entitled to the promotion, had been promised it, in fact, and had made his plans accordingly, there was no course open except resignation. If he did not resign voluntarily, he knew that his new superior would eventually force him to do so, for Blakeley would build up an organization of his own, and in it there would be no place for one who had aspired to the highest office.

Inasmuch as his assistant was concerned in this threatened calamity, Runnels made haste to lay the matter before him. At first Kirk was inclined to take it as a joke, but his friend quickly brought him to a more serious frame of mind.

"No," he said, "Blakeley has finally put it over. He's wanted this position for a long time, and I guess the Cortlandts weren't strong enough to prevent it—or else they have broken with the Colonel."

"Didn't he promise you the job?"

"Sure! But what are promises? I've been double−crossed, that's all. It means I must quit."

"Of course. I'm trying to figure out what it will mean to me."

Runnels smiled grimly. "The same thing it would mean to me if I stayed, I'd go back to my desk; in a month I'd have a row with Blakeley, no matter what I did; then I'd be fired and have a tough time getting a job with another railroad. Of course, the Cortlandts might do more for you than they would for me, and you might be able to hang on."

"Then this would seem to end our fine hopes, eh?"

"Rather!" Runnels broke out, bitterly. "I've worked like a nigger, Kirk, and I deserve promotion if anybody ever did. This other fellow is a dub—he has proven that. Why, I've forgotten more railroading than he'll ever know. Every man on the system hates him and likes me; and on top of it all I was PROMISED the job. It's tough on the wife and the kid."

He stopped to swallow his emotion. He was a single−purposed, somewhat serious man, a little lacking in resilience, and he could not meet misfortune with Kirk's careless self−confidence.

"I gave this job the best I had in me," he went on, "for I had the idea that I was doing something patriotic, something for my country—that's the way they used to talk about this Canal, you know. I've put in four years of hell; I've lost step with the world; I've lost my business connections in the States; and I haven't saved up any money, I CAN'T quit, and yet I'll have to, for if I'm fired it'll mean I'll have to go back there and start at the bottom again. Those people don't know anything about these damned politics; they'll think I made a failure here in government work, and I'll have to live it down. Still, I suppose I ought not to kick—it's happening all the time to other fellows who came down here with hopes as high as mine—fellows who have given even more to the job than I have. What are YOU going to do?"

Kirk started. "Oh, I don't know. I was thinking about you. This job doesn't worry me, for I'm on my feet at last, and I know I have the goods with me—they can have my position and welcome. Now, about you. I haven't spent much of that lottery coin. It's in the bank, all that Allan hasn't used, and half of it is yours, if you'll take it. You and Mrs. Runnels and the kid, and Allan and I —and one other party—will hike back home and get something else to do. What do you say?"

Runnels' voice shook as he answered: "By Jove! You're the—real stuff, Anthony. I'll think it over." He turned away as if ashamed of his show of feeling, only to whirl about with the question, "Who is this 'other party'?"

"My wife."

"Good Lord! You're not married?"

"No, but I'm going to be. You talk about YOUR troubles; now listen to mine. I'll make you weep like a fog." Briefly he told his friend of the blow that had so suddenly fallen upon him.

"You ARE up against it, old man," agreed Runnels, when he had heard all. "Garavel has set his heart on the Presidency, and he'll pay any price to get it. It's the same all over Central America; these people are mad on politics. There are never more than two parties, you know—the Wanters and the Hasers. The Wanters are out and the Hasers are in; that's what makes these wicked little revolutions at every change of the moon—it isn't a question of policy at all. Now, if Miss Gertrudis were an American girl, she might rebel, elope, do something like that, but she's been reared with the Spanish notions of obedience, and I dare say she will submit tamely because she doesn't know how to put up a fight. That's an admirable characteristic in a wife, but not very helpful in a sweetheart."

"Well, she's half American," said Kirk.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean the game isn't over. I carried the ball forty yards once for a touchdown in the last ten seconds of play, and Yale won. I had good 'interference' then, and I need it now. Somebody'll have to run ahead of me."

Runnels smiled. "I guess you can count on me. What is the plan?"

For the next half−hour the two talked earnestly, their heads together, their voices low.

"I don't believe it will work, my boy," Runnels said at last. "I know these people better than you, and yet—Lord! if it does come off!" He whistled softly. "Well, they may kick the political props out from under us, but there will be an awful crash when we hit. Now, don't mention this rumor about Blakeley. I want to see Steve Cortlandt first."

"Cortlandt! By−the−way, do you happen to remember that he's to be our guest for supper to−morrow night? Kind of a joke now, trying to thank him for what he's done, isn't it?"

"Not at all. It may be our one chance of salvation; he may be the one person who can help us."

"Well," Kirk reflected, "I have a good deal to thank him for, I suppose, outside of this, and I'll go through with my part."

He proceeded at once to put his plan into execution, his first step being to rent a room at the Tivoli, taking particular care to select one on the first floor in the north wing. That evening he and Allan moved. It was a simple process, yet he felt that he was engaged in the most momentous act of his Hie. As to its outcome much depended upon Runnels and much more upon himself—so much, in fact, that when he came to look at the matter coldly he confessed the hope of success was slender. But such as it was he clung to it desperately.

Runnels telephoned during the evening that he had been equal to his part of the task, so there remained nothing to do but wait for the hour of the dance.

Over and over Anthony asked himself if he were not foolish to pin his faith to so slight a chance, but he could find no answer. He slept little amid his new surroundings that night, and awoke Saturday morning thrilled with the certainty that his life's crisis was but a few hours away.

It was considerably after dark on Saturday evening that John Weeks, American Consul at Colon, received a caller who came to him direct from the Royal Mail steamer just docked. At first sight the stranger did not impress Mr. Weeks as a man of particular importance. His face was insignificant, and his pale−blue eyes showed little force. His only noticeable feature was displayed when he removed his hat. Then it could be seen that a wide, white scar ran from just over his temple to a point back of his right ear.

He made his name known as Williams, which, of course, meant nothing to the consul, and while drinking one of Weeks' high− balls, inquired idly about the country, the climate, and the people, as if in no hurry to come to his point. Weeks watched him shrewdly, convinced at last by his visitor's excessive caution that his first judgment had been wrong, and that the man was more knowing than he seemed. Mr. Williams was likewise studying the fat man, and when he had satisfied himself, came out openly with these words:

"I'm looking for a chap named Wellar. He landed here some time late in November."

"Friend of yours?"

"Um—m—not exactly." Mr. Williams ran a hand meditatively over the ragged scar on his scalp, as if from force of habit.

"Wellar? I never heard of him."

"He may have travelled under another name. Ever hear of a fellow called Locke?"

The consul's moist lips drew together, his red eyes gleamed watchfully. "Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," said he. "Why do you want him?"

"I heard he was here. I'd enjoy meeting him again."

"What does he look like?"

Mr. Williams rattled off a description of Kirk Anthony so photographic that the consul suddenly saw a great light.

"Yes, I know him all right," he confessed, warmly. "He's a good friend of mine, too; in fact, he lived with me for a while." Misconstruing the eager expression that came to his caller's face, he rose heavily and thrust out a thick, wet hand. "Don't let's beat about the bush, Mr. Anthony; your son is safe and well and making a name for himself. I'm happy to say I helped him—not much, to be sure, but all I could—yes, sir, I acknowledge the corn—and I'm glad to meet you at last. I have been waiting for you to arrive, and I'm glad you dropped in on me. I have a lot of things to talk about."

But the other stared upward impatiently. "No, no! You've got me wrong. I'm a detective, and I'm after your friend Wellar, alias Locke, alias Anthony, He's wanted for embezzlement and assault and a few other things, and I'm going to take him." The indistinctive Mr. Williams spoke sharply, and his pale blue eyes were suddenly hard and bright.

Weeks stared open−mouthed for an instant. "Then you're really not Darwin K. Anthony?" he gasped.

"Certainly not. Here's the warrant. I'm sorry this chap is your pal, but—"

"My pal! Hell, I hate him like the smallpox. Good thing you spoke or I'd have sold you a cocoanut grove. I KNEW he was wrong. Embezzler, eh? Well, well!"

"Eighty thousand, that's all, and he's got it on him."

"You're wrong there; he was broke when he landed. I ought to know."

"Oh no! He came down on the Santa Cruz; I've seen the purser. He travelled under the name of Jefferson Locke. There's no mistake, and he couldn't have blown it all. No, it's sewed into his shirt, and I'm here to grab it."

Weeks whistled in amazement. "He IS a shrewd one. Eighty thou— Lord, I wish I'd known that! He's here, all right, working for the railroad and living at Panama. He's made good, too, and got some influential friends. Oh, this is great!"

"Working, hey? Clever stall! Do you see that?" Williams inclined his head for a fuller display of the disfiguration over his ear. "He hung that on me, with a bottle. I damn near died." He laughed disagreeably. "He'll go back, and he'll go back quick. How do I get to Panama?"

Weeks consulted his watch hastily.

"You've missed the last train; but we'll go over together in the morning. I want to have a hand in this arrest for reasons of my own; I don't like him or his influential friends." He began to chuckle ponderously. "No, I don't like his influential friends, in particular."

While this scene was being enacted on the north side of the Isthmus, Kirk Anthony, over at the Tivoli Hotel, was making himself ready for the ball with particular pains. Even his personal appearance might have a bearing upon the outcome of this adventure, and he dared not overlook the slightest advantage.

Allan regarded him admiringly from many angles.

"Oh, Master h'Auntony," he exclaimed, rapturously, "you are beautiful!"

"Thanks! Again thanks! Now, can you remember to do as I have told you?"

"I would die—"

"DON'T say that again, I'm too nervous. Here are your instructions, once more. Keep both doors to this room locked and stand by the one to the veranda! Don't let any one in except Mr. Runnels and the man he'll bring. DON'T—LEAVE—THIS—SPOT, no matter what happens. Does that penetrate your teakwood dome? Does your ivory cue−ball encompass that thought?"

"I shall watch this h'apartment carefully, never fear."

"But I do fear. I'm scared to death. My hands are go cold they are brittle. Remember, when I knock, so, let me in instantly, and keep your wits about you."

"H'Allan never fails, sar. But what is coming to pahss?"

"Never mind what is coming to pass. This is going to be a big night, my boy—a very big night." Kirk strolled out into the hall and made his way to the lobby.

Already the orchestra was tuning up, the wide porches were filling with well−dressed people, while a stream of coaches at the door was delivering the arrivals on the special from Colon. It was a very animated crowd, sprinkled plentifully with Spanish people— something quite unusual, by−the−way—while the presence of many uniforms gave the affair almost the brilliance of a military function. There were marine officers from Bas Obispo, straight, trim, brown of cheek; naval officers from the cruisers in the roadstead, clad in their white trousers and bell−boy jackets; army officers detailed from Washington on special duty; others from the various parts of the work itself.

Kirk wandered about through the confusion, nodding to his friends, chatting here and there, his eyes fixed anxiously upon the door.

Clifford approached and fell into conversation with him.

"Great doings, eh? I came up from the Central just to see what these affairs are like. Did you see to−night's paper?"

"No."

"Garavel is going to run for President. This is a kind of political coming−out party."

"So I believe."

"It looked like a fight between him and General Alfarez, but they've patched it up, and the General is going to withdraw. Garavel is to have Uncle Sam's congratulations and co−operation. It's a joke, isn't it, this international good feeling?"

"Excuse me." Anthony saw Runnels searching the room with anxiety. He hurried toward him and inquired, breathlessly:

"Have you got him?"

"Sure, I showed him your room."

"Did you lock him in?"

"Certainly not."

"He'll get away."

"Oh no, he'll be on the job. Has she come?"

Kirk shook his head. "Gee! I'm nervous." He wiped his brow with a shaking hand.

"Don't weaken," Runnels encouraged. "I'm beginning to believe you'll pull it off. I told my wife all about it—thought we might need her—and she's perfectly crazy. I never saw her so excited. Let me know as soon as you can which dance it will be. This suspense—Gad! There they are now! Go to it, old man."

Into the lobby came a mixed group, in which were Andres Garavel, his daughter, Ramon Alfarez, and the Cortlandts. Kirk's face was white as he went boldly to meet them, but he did his best to smile unconcernedly. He shook hands with Edith and her husband, bowed to Gertrudis, then turned to meet her father's stare.

"May I have a word with you, sir?"

Garavel inclined his head silently. As the others moved on he said: "This is hardly a suitable time or place, Mr. Anthony."

"Oh, I'm not going to kick up a fuss. I didn't answer your note, because there was nothing to say. You still wish me to cease my attentions?"

"I do! It is her wish and mine."

"Then I shall do so, of course. If Miss Garavel is dancing to− night I would like your permission to place my name on her programme."

"No!" exclaimed the banker.

"Purely to avoid comment. Every one knows I have been calling upon her, and that report of our engagement got about considerably; it would set people talking if she snubbed me. That is the only reason I came to this dance. Believe me, I'd rather have stayed away."

"Perhaps you are right. Let us have no unpleasantness and no gossip about the affair, by all means. I consent, then." Garavel's voice altered and he said, with more of his natural geniality, "I am very glad you take the matter so sensibly, Mr. Anthony; it was, after all, but a dream of youth."

"And permit me to offer my congratulations upon the honor your country is about to bestow upon you." Conversing in a friendly manner, they followed the rest of the party.

As the banker appeared upon the threshold of the ballroom a murmur ran through the crowd; faces were

turned in his direction, whispers were exchanged, showing that already the news had travelled. Conscious of this notice and its reason, Garavel drew himself up; he walked with the tread of an emperor.

Kirk ignored Ramon's scowl as he requested the pleasure of seeing Chiquita's programme; then pretended not to notice her start of surprise. After a frightened look at her father, she timidly extended the card to him, and he wrote his name upon it.

As he finished he found Mrs. Cortlandt regarding him.

"Will you dance with me?" he inquired. "Yes. I saved the fourth and the tenth." As he filled in the allotted spaces, she said, in a low voice, "You are the boldest person! Did Mr. Garavel give you leave to do that, or—"

"Of course! Thank you." He made his way out of the press that had gathered and toward the open air. He was shaking with nervousness and cursed all government hotels where a man is denied the solace of a drink.

Runnels pounced upon him just outside.

"Well, well, quick! Did you make it?"

"Number nine."

"Good! I was gnawing my finger−nails. Whew! I'm glad that is over. Now pull yourself together and don't forget you have the first dance with Mrs. Runnels. There goes the music. I—I'm too rattled to dance."

Anthony found his friend's wife bubbling with excitement, and scarcely able to contain herself.

"Oh, I'll never live through it, I know," she cried, as soon as they were out upon the floor. "How CAN you be so calm?"

"I'm not. I'm as panicky as you are."

"And she, poor little thing! She seems frightened to death."

"But—isn't she beautiful?"

Mrs. Runnels admitted the fact cheerfully, and at the same time noted how her partner's muscles swelled and hardened as Miss Garavel glided past in the arms of Ramon Alfarez. It gave her a thrill to see a real drama unfolding thus before her very eyes.

To Kirk, Chiquita had never appeared so ravishing, nor so purely Spanish as to−night. She was clad in some mysterious filmy white stuff that floated about her form like a mist. The strangeness and brilliance of her surroundings had frightened her a little, and the misery at her heart had filled her wide, dark eyes with a plaintive melancholy. But she was entirely the fine lady through it all, and she accepted the prominence that was hers as the leading senorita of the Republic with simple dignity and unconcern. The women began to whisper her name, the men followed her with admiring glances. At every interval between dances she was besieged by gayly clad officers, civilians in white—the flower of her own people and of the American colony as well—all eager to claim her attention or to share in her shy, slow smile.

Now and then her eyes strayed to Kirk with a look that made his blood move quicker. It boded well for the success of his plans, and filled him with a fierce, hot gladness. But how the moments dragged!

General Alfarez entered the room amid a buzz of comment. Then, as he greeted his rival, Garavel, with a smile and a handshake, a round of applause broke forth. The members of the Commission sought them both out, and congratulations were exchanged. At last the Garavel boom was launched in earnest.

Mrs. Cortlandt expressed a desire to sit out the fourth dance.

"So, your engagement to Miss Garavel is broken?" she began, when she and Kirk had seated themselves in two of the big rockers that lined the porch.

"All smashed to pieces, running−gear broken, steering−knuckle bent, gasolene tank punctured. I need a tow."

"You take it calmly."

"What's the use of struggling? I'm no Samson to go around pulling down temples."

"Did you expect her to yield so tamely?"

"I didn't know she had yielded. In fact, I haven't had a chance to talk to her."

"But she has. Mr. Garavel told me not an hour ago that as soon as he explained his wishes she consented to marry Ramon without a protest."

"A refusal would have meant the death of the old man's chances, I presume. She acted quite dutifully."

"Yes. If she had refused Ramon, I doubt if we could have saved her father. As it is, the General withdraws and leaves the field clear, the two young people are reunited, quite as if you had never appeared, and you—My dear Kirk, now what about you?"

"Oh, I don't count. I never have counted in anything, you know. That's the trouble with good−natured people. But is it true that Garavel is practically elected?"

"General Alfarez couldn't very well step in after he had publicly stepped out, could he? That would be a trifle too treacherous; he'd lose his support, and our people could then have an excuse to take a hand. I'm tremendously glad it's all settled finally, I assure you. It was a strain; and although I'm sorry you got your fingers pinched between the political wheels, I'm relieved that the uncertainty is ended."

So far they had been speaking like mere acquaintances, but now Kirk turned upon her a trifle bitterly.

"I think you worked it very cleverly, Mrs. Cortlandt," he said. "Of course, I had no chance to win against a person of your diplomatic gifts. I had my nerve to try."

She regarded him without offence at this candor, then nodded.

"Yes. You see, it meant more to me than to you or to her. With you two it is but a romance forgotten in a night. I have pretty nearly outlived romance."

"You think I will forget easily? That's not flattering."

"All men do. You will even forget my part in the affair, and we will be better friends than ever."

"Suppose I don't choose to accept what it pleases people to hand me?"

"My dear Kirk!" She smiled. "You will have to in this case. There is nothing else to do."

He shook his head. "I hoped we could be friends, Mrs. Cortlandt, but it seems we can't be."

At this she broke out, imperiously, her eyes flashing.

"I ask nothing you can't give. I have never been denied, and I won't be denied now. You can't afford to break with me."

"Indeed! Why do you think that?"

"Listen! I've shown you what I can do in a few months. In a year you can be a great success. That's how big men are made; they know the short−cuts. You are too inexperienced yet to know what success and power mean, but you are beginning to learn, and when you have learned you will thank me for breaking up this foolish romance. I don't ask you to forget your manhood. I ask nothing. I am content to wait. You want to become a big man like your father. Well, Runnels will be out of the way soon; Blakeley amounts to nothing. You will be the Superintendent."

"So! That's not merely a rumor about Blakeley? Runnels is fired, eh?"

"Yes."

"If I choose not to give up Chiq—Miss Garavel, then what? It means the end of me here, is that it?"

"If you 'choose'! Why, my dear, you have no choice whatever in the matter. It is practically closed. You can do nothing—although, if you really intend to make trouble, I shall walk inside when I leave and inform the old gentleman, in which case he will probably send the girl home at once, and take very good care to give you no further opportunity. Ramon is only too anxious to marry her. As to this being the end of you here, well, I really don't see how it could be otherwise. No Kirk, it's for you to decide whether you wish to be shown the secret path up the mountain or to scale the cliffs unaided. There are no conditions. You merely mustn't play the fool."

"And if I don't agree you will tell Mr. Garavel that I'm going to make trouble?" He mused aloud, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She said nothing, so he went on cautiously, sparring for time.

"Well, inasmuch as this seems to be a plain business proposition, suppose I think it over. When it comes time for our next dance, I'll say yes or no."

"As you please."

"Very well. The music has stopped; we'd better go in."

As they rose she laid her hand upon his arm and he felt it tremble as she exclaimed:

"Believe me, Kirk, this isn't at all easy for me, but—I can't bear to lose."

XXV. CHECKMATE!

Anthony had no partner for the eighth dance, and was very glad of it, for he could not have carried off the necessary small talk. As it was, he felt that his excitement must be patent to those around him. His mind was filled with tormenting doubts, his chance for success seemed so infinitely small, his plan so extravagantly impracticable, now that the time had come!

As the music ceased and the dancers came pouring out into the cool night air, Runnels approached with his wife.

"Well, are you equal to it?" he asked.

Kirk nodded; he could not speak.

"Why, you look as cold as ice," exclaimed the woman, half− resentfully. "I'm the only one who seems to feel it. I—I'm positively delirious. My partners look at me in the strangest way, as if they thought I were liable to become dangerous at any moment."

"Not too loud!" her husband cautioned, then to Kirk: "Good−luck, old man. Lord! I need a bracer." His words stuck in his throat, and Kirk realized that he was himself the calmest of the three. Together, Runnels and his wife strolled off through the crowd, disappearing in the direction of the north wing of the hotel.

It seemed ages before the orchestra struck up; Kirk began to fear that something had happened to the musicians. He edged closer to the door and searched out Chiquita with his eyes. There she was, seated with her father, Colonel Bland from Gatun, and some high officer or other—probably an admiral. Ramon Alfarez was draped artistically over the back of her chair, curling his mustache tenderly and smiling vacantly at the conversation.

Kirk ground his teeth together and set his feet as if for the sound of the referee's whistle. He heard the orchestra leader tap his music−stand; then, as the first strains of the waltz floated forth, he stepped into the ballroom and made toward his sweetheart. All at once he found that his brain was clear, his heart−beats measured.

Of course she saw him coming; she had waited all the long evening for this moment. He saw her hand flutter uncertainly to her throat; then, as he paused before her, she rose without a word. His arm encircled her waist, her little, cold palm dropped into his as lightly as a snowflake, and they glided away together. He found himself whispering her name over and over again passionately.

"Why—why did you do this, senor?" she protested, faintly. "It is very hard for me."

"It is the last time I shall ever hold you—this way."

She faltered, her breath caught. "Please! My father is looking. Ramon—"

"Have you agreed to marry him?"

"Yes! No no! Oh, I have prayed to the Virgin every hour. I cannot, and yet I must. See! I cannot waltz, senor, I have s−stepped upon you. Take me back to my seat."

For answer he pressed her closer to his breast, holding her up without effort. The incense from her hair was robbing him of his wits, his old wild desire to pick her up and carry her away swept over him.

"Don't—esqueeze—me—so!" she exclaimed. "I cannot hold back—the tears. I am so unhappy. If I could die quickly—now."

"Let us go out on the porch."

"No, no! We must remain in my father's sight. Will you take me to my seat?"

"No, I want you to listen carefully to what I'm going to say." He spoke low and earnestly. "Try to show nothing in your face, for they are watching us." Seeing her more composed and attentive, he went on:

"Don't stop dancing now, when I tell you. Chiquita dear, you must marry me, to−night, right away! I have arranged everything. No, don't look up at me until I have finished. Try to smile. I've planned it all out and everything is in readiness. I have a room just around the corner of the veranda; there's a judge waiting for us, and Runnels and his wife—"

"You are mad!" she gasped.

"No, no. We'll slip through one of the French windows, and we'll be back again before they miss us. Nobody will know. I tell you they're waiting. If we are missed they'll think—it doesn't matter what they think, you'll be my

wife, and Ramon can't marry you then. We'll say nothing about it until your father is elected President."

"Senor, one cannot be married in a moment. I am Catholic—the banns—"

"I've thought of all that, but a civil marriage is binding. We'll have the religious ceremony afterward; meanwhile this will stop Ramon, at least. I promise not to see you again until you send for me, until your father's hopes are realized. You may wait as long as you wish, and nobody will know. They tricked you, Chiquita dear; I can't explain, but it wasn't all politics, by any means. Oh, girl! Don't you understand, I love you—love you? It's our only chance." The words were tumbling from his lips incoherently; he was pleading as if for his life, while she clung to him to support herself. Through it all their feet moved rhythmically, their bodies swayed to the cadences of the waltz as they circled the ballroom. He guided her among the other whirling figures, under the very eyes of her father and her fiance, while more than one of the onlookers commented upon the handsome appearance of these young people, the one so stalwart and blond and Northern, the other so chic and dark and tropical.

He knew it was her lifelong loyalty, her traditional sense of obedience, that made her hesitate.

"It was treachery to both of us," he urged; "they imposed upon your father, but when he has won he'll forgive us. I know what I'm saying; Mrs. Cortlandt told me to−night."

"Mother of God!" she exclaimed, faintly. "Is it that I am dreaming?"

"They are waiting for us; the dance is half over already. I love you—better than all the world. Do you remember two nights ago? You kissed me then, and—I—I can't live without you. We'll go away together, you and I, through all the world—just we two." She trembled against him. "Quick!" he cried in her ear. "We're coming to the spot. They can't see us now. If you feel weak, hold to my arm until we are outside."

She gave a hysterical, choking sob that was half a sigh; then her eyes flashed upward to his—they were wide and bright and shining— her lips were parted, her body was lithe and full of life. She slipped from his embrace, whispering:

"Yes, yes! Quickly, senor!" And the next instant they were out upon the wide gallery with the dance behind them. "Hurree, hurree! Or they will follow."

Together they fled along the north wing of the hotel; the girl was panting, with one hand held to her bare throat; but there was no need for him to help her, for she ran like a fawn.

"Here!" He swung her around the corner and rapped sharply at a door.

"Quickly! Quickly!" she moaned. "For the love of—"

With terrific force the door was fairly jerked from its hinges and slammed to behind them. The next moment Allan's big body was leaning against it, as if the wall were about to fall inward upon him. Runnels leaped forward with an exclamation, his wife stood staring, her face as white as snow. With them was the genial gray− haired judge from Colon, whom Kirk had met at the Wayfarers Club on the night of his arrival.

"You made it!" Runnels cried, triumphantly.

"Miss Garavel!" his wife echoed. "Thank Heaven you came!"

"Quick, the music will stop! Judge, this is Miss Garavel—you must marry us just as fast as you can."

"I presume you consent?" the judge asked, with a smile at the girl.

"I—I want to be happy," she said, simply. Her bosom was heaving, her pansy eyes were fastened upon the magistrate with a look of pleading that drove the smile from his lips. She clung to Anthony's arm as if she feared these strangers might tear him away.

"You understand, Judge, she's of age; so am I. They want to force her to marry a man she doesn't—"

The muffled strains of music ceased. There came the faint clapping of hands.

"Madre de Dios!" Miss Garavel cried. "We are too late." She beat her little palms together in desperation.

There was a breathless interval. Then the music began again, and to its throbbing measures the marriage ceremony was performed. As the last word was pronounced, Mrs. Runnels burst into tears and hid her face against her husband's breast. Runnels himself held forth a shaking hand to Kirk, then patted the bride clumsily upon her shoulder.

"I know you will be happy now, Mrs. Anthony," he said.

With an incoherent cry of delight, Kirk folded his wife in his arms, and she kissed him before them all.

"Senor, I will love you always," she said, shyly.

During the progress of this scene, Allan Allan of Jamaica had stood frozen with amazement, a door−knob wedged firmly into the small of his back, his eyes distended and rolling; but when Mrs. Runnels collapsed, as at a

signal he too dissolved in tears.

"Oh, glory to God, boss," he sobbed, "you is a beautiful bridegroom!"

"Come, we must get back, the music has stopped again." Kirk turned to the judge. "Nothing is to be said until Miss Gar—Mrs. Anthony gives the word; you understand? I can't thank you all half enough. Now, Allan, see if the coast is clear, quickly!" He was still in a panic, for there yet remained a chance of discovery and ruin. One more instant of suspense, then the two stepped out; the door closed softly behind them and they strolled around the corner of the north wing and into the crowd. It had all happened so quickly that even yet they were dazed and disbelieving.

"My wife!" Kirk whispered, while a tremendous rush of emotion swept over him. She trembled in answer like a wind−shaken leaf. "You're mine, Chiquita! They can't take you away." His voice broke.

"I am still dreaming. What have I done? Oh−h—they will know; in my face they will read the truth. But I do not care. Is—it indeed true?"

They were at the entrance to the ballroom now, through which they had come a few minutes before, and, pausing, she gave him a half− serious, half−timid glance.

"Senor, I do not know if some time you will be sorry for this action, but I shall never cease loving you. I prayed hourly to the Blessed Virgin, and she heard. Now, I shall perish until you come."

"When you give me leave; through steel and stone, through fire and water."

"Quick, for the one more time, call me—that—" She hesitated, blushing vividly. "I will hear it in my dreams."

"My wife!" he whispered, tenderly.

"Ho! Chiquita mia!" her father cried, as they came to him. "There you are then. I have missed you." His eyes smouldered as he gazed suspiciously at Kirk.

"Ah, but I was too warm," she said, easily. "Yonder by the door we have been standing in the night breeze. And where is Ramon?"

"He is looking for you."

"One would think him a jealous husband already," she exclaimed, lightly. Then, extending her hand coolly to Kirk, "I thank you, senor, for the—dance."

Her husband bowed. "I shall not soon forget it." To the father he added, in a low voice: "I thank you, also, for your courtesy. We have been discussing your daughter's marriage during the dance, and it is my one greatest hope that she will never regret it."

The banker acknowledged the words ceremoniously. "Love is a thing that comes and goes; marriage alone can bind it. Some day you will thank me, and then perhaps you will honor our house again, eh?"

"I shall be happy to come whenever you wish." As he walked away, the banker said, with relief:

"He takes it well; he is proud—almost like a Spaniard."

Kirk moved through the crowd as if in a trance, but he was beginning to realize the truth now; it surged over him in great waves of gladness. He longed to shout his news aloud. What luck was his! The world was made for him; there was no such thing as adversity or failure—Chiquita was his wife! All Christendom might go to pot for all he cared; that marvellous fact was unalterable. Yes, and he could speak his mind to Mrs. Cortlandt. His tentative acceptance of the terms she made sickened him. He wanted to rid himself of this false position as soon as possible. What mattered her threats? What did he care for the things she could give or withhold when all the glad open world was beckoning to him and to his bride? Success! Riches! He could win them for himself. Chiquita was all and more than they, and he was a god!

In the midst of his rhapsody he heard a bell−boy speaking his name, and smiled at him vacantly as he turned away. But the negro followed him persistently, saying something about a letter.

"Letter? I have no time to write letters. Oh, I beg pardon, letter for ME?" He took the missive from the silver tray and stuffed it absent−mindedly into a pocket, fumbling meanwhile for a tip. "I don't seem to have any money, my boy, but money, after all, means nothing."

"It is h'impartant, sar."

"Oh yes, the letter. Very well." He opened the envelope and pretended to read, but in reality the sheet held nothing for him but a ravishing, mischievous face, with pansy eyes. He must have stood staring unseeingly at it for several seconds. Then the dancing visions faded and the scrawl stood out plainly:

Williams, detective, St. Louis, arrived at Colon this evening on the Prince Joachim. You'd better take it on the

run.

It was written upon Tivoli paper, but the hand was strange and it was not signed.

"Well!" Kirk came suddenly to himself, and a spasm of disgust seized him. "What a rotten inconvenience!" he said aloud. But before he had time to measure the effect of this new complication the swelling music reminded him that this dance belonged to Mrs. Cortlandt and that her answer was due.

She was waiting for him in the gallery, and motioned him to the chair adjoining hers.

"I can't two−step and talk at the same time," she said, "and here we'll be quite private."

Kirk remained standing. "What I have to say won't take long. I've made up my mind, and I—"

Edith interrupted him with a lightness that her look belied:

"Oh, let's not discuss it. I don't want you to answer. I don't want to think of it. I just want to forget—and to plan. You understand how I feel?" She faced him with eyes bright and lustrous, her red lips parted in a smile. She was a very beautiful woman, Kirk realized—a very compelling, unusual woman, and one whose capabilities seemed unbounded. He began dimly to perceive that all women have great capabilities for good or evil, depending largely upon the accident of their environment, and with this thought came the feeling that he must speak frankly now or prove himself worse than base. If only she were of the weakly feminine type his task would be far easier. But it was hard to strike her, for the very reason that he knew she would take the blow bravely and meet its full force.

"I must answer," he said. "I don't want to pretend; I'm not good at lying. I can't go through with any such arrangement as you suggested. Why, the very idea is positively—fierce. You've been awfully nice to me, but I had no idea of—this. Besides, Cortlandt's an awfully decent chap, and—and, well," he concluded, lamely, "there are lots of reasons."

"Oh no! There is only one reason; all the others count for nothing." She spoke in a voice that he could scarcely hear.

"Perhaps! But it's—just impossible."

"You know what it means?" She stared at him with hard, level eyes. "I'm not a moderate person—I can't do things by halves. No! I see you don't think of that, you are mad over this Garavel girl. But you can't get her." Something in his dazzled, love−foolish smile enraged her. "So! You are planning even now. Well, then, understand there are practical reasons, political reasons, why you can't have her. If Garavel were insane enough to consent, others would not. She is part of—the machine, and there are those who will not consent to see all their work spoiled. That is altogether apart from me, you understand. I can build, and I can destroy—"

"There's nothing more to say," he interrupted her, quietly, "so I'd better excuse myself."

"Yes! I would prefer to be alone."

When he had bowed himself away she crushed the fan in her hand, staring out across the lights of the city below, and it was thus that Cortlandt found her a few moments later, as he idled along the veranda, his hands in his pockets, a cigarette between his lips. He dropped into the empty chair beside her, saying:

"Hello! Thought you had this with Anthony?"

"I had."

"What's the trouble?"

"There is no trouble." She began to rock, while he studied her profile; then, conscious of his look, she inquired, "Aren't you dancing?"

"No, just looking on, as usual. I prefer to watch. You have broken your fan, it seems." He flung his cigarette into the darkness and, reaching out, took the fan from her hand. She saw that his lips were drawn back in a peculiar smile.

"Well! Is that so strange?" she answered, sharply. "You seem—" She broke off and looked deliberately away from him.

"Row, eh?" he inquired, softly.

She could barely hold back her hatred of the man. He had worked powerfully upon her nerves of late, and she was half hysterical.

"Why do you take pleasure in annoying me?" she cried. "What ails you these last few weeks? I can't stand it—I won't—"

"Oh! Pardon! One quarrel an evening is enough. I should have known better."

She turned upon him at this, but once more checked the words that clamored for utterance. Her look, however, was a warning. She bit her lip and said nothing.

"Too bad you and he don't hit it off better; he likes me."

There was no answer.

"He's giving me a party after the dance, sort of a gratitude affair. A delicate way to acknowledge a debt, eh?"

She saw that his hand shook as he lit a fresh cigarettes, and the strangeness of his tone made her wonder. "You know very well it is Runnels' doing," she said.

"Oh, there are six of them in it altogether, but Anthony originated the little surprise. It's intended for you, of course."

"I don't see it. Are you going?"

"I accepted."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Bah! They won't give it," he said, harshly.

"And why not? I think it is rather nice of those chaps. Of course, Runnels would like to ingratiate himself with you—"

"Funny spectacle, eh? Me the guest of—Anthony!"

There was a trace of anxiety in her voice as she answered, and, though she spoke carelessly, she did not meet his eyes.

"I—I'd rather you'd make an excuse. I'll have to go home alone, you know."

He raised his brows mockingly. "My DEAR! I'm to be the honored guest."

"Suit yourself, of course."

A marine officer approached, mopping his face, and engaged her in conversation, whereupon Cortlandt rose languidly and strolled away through the crowd that came eddying forth from the ballroom.

Meanwhile, Kirk had found Runnels, who was looking for him, eager to express his congratulations and to discuss their exploit in detail.

"I've just taken the wife home," he explained. "I never saw anybody so excited. If she'd stayed here she'd have given the whole thing away, sure. Why, she wasn't half so much affected by her own marriage."

"I—I haven't pulled myself together yet. Funny thing—I've just been watching my wife dancing with the man she is engaged to. Gee! It's great to be married."

"She's the dearest thing I ever saw; and wasn't she game? Alice will cry for weeks over this. Why, it's the sob−fest of her lifetime. She's bursting with grief and rapture. I hope your wife can keep a secret better than mine, otherwise there will be a tremendous commotion before to−morrow's sun sets. I suppose now I'll have to hang around home with my finger on my lip, saying 'Hist!' until the news comes out. Whew! I am thirsty."

Anthony did not tell his friend about the detective in Colon and his mysterious warning, partly because he was not greatly disturbed by it and trusted to meeting the difficulty in proper time, and partly because his mind was once more too full of his great good−fortune to permit of any other interest. Now that he had some one to whom he could talk freely, he let himself go, and he was deep in conversation when Stephen Cortlandt strolled up and stopped for an instant to say:

"Quite a lively party, isn't it?"

Kirk noticed how sallow he had grown in the past few months, and how he had fallen off in weight. He looked older, too; his cheeks had sunken in until they outlined his jaws sharply. He seemed far from well; a nervous twitching of his fingers betokened the strain he had been under. He was quite as immaculate as usual, however, quite as polished and collected.

"How is our little 'stag' coming on?" he asked.

"Fine! Everything is ready," said Runnels. "You won't expect an elaborate layout; it's mostly cold storage, you know, but we'll at least be able to quench our thirst at the Central."

"Then it's really coming off? I was—afraid you'd forgotten it." Cortlandt cast a curious glance at Kirk, who exclaimed, heartily:

"Well, hardly!" Then, as their prospective guest moved off, "What a strange remark!"

"Yes," said Runnels, "he's a queer fellow; but then, you know, he's about as emotional as a toad."

XXVI. THE CRASH

Kirk had no further chance of speaking with his wife, for after the dance she was whisked away, leaving him nothing but the memory of an adoring, blissful glance as she passed. With Runnels and Cortlandt and the rest, he was driven to the Hotel Central, where they found a very attractive table set in a private dining−room. It was a lively party, and Kirk's secret elation enabled him to play the part of host with unforced geniality. The others joined him in a hearty effort to show their guest the high regard in which they held him, and if Cortlandt did not enjoy himself, it was entirely his own fault.

Toward Kirk, however, he preserved a peculiar attitude, which only the young man's self−absorption prevented him from noticing. If he had been less jubilant, he must have felt the unnatural aloofness of the other man's bearing; but even had he done so, he would doubtless have attributed it to Cortlandt's well−recognized frigidity.

At the propitious moment, Runnels, who had reluctantly agreed to share the social responsibility, made a little speech, explaining that he and his boys had been sensible from the first of their guest's interest in them, and were deeply grateful for it. They were all working together, he said, and what helped one helped another. They had banded together, and now tendered him a token of their regard in a form which he could preserve.

"It's a little late," he smiled, "in view of the rumor that has been going round within the last day or so, but, no matter what happens to any one of us in the readjustment of our department, we appreciate the help you have given us collectively."

He handed a handsome loving−cup to Cortlandt, who thanked him appropriately, then waited courteously for the party to break up. But Anthony rose, saying:

"I simply have to say a word on my own account, fellows, for I owe Mr. Cortlandt more than any of you."

The object of these remarks shot a swift, questioning glance from his stony eyes, and raised a hand as if to check him. But Kirk ran on unheeding:

"I want to thank him before all of you for what he has done for me personally. When I landed in Panama I was a rotter. I'd never worked, and never intended to; I rather despised people who did. I represented the unearned increment. I was broke and friendless, and what ideas I had were all wrong. This is something you don't know, perhaps, but no sooner had I landed than I got into trouble of the worst sort, and Mr. Cortlandt got me out. He was my bail− bond; he put me up at his hotel; gave me clothes, and paid my way until I got started. I was a stranger, mind you, but he's been just like one of my own people, and if I ever succeed in doing anything really worth while, it will be due to the start he gave me."

Though the words were commonplace enough, they carried a sincere message, and Cortlandt saw by the faces about him that the others were pleased. His own gaunt features turned more sallow than ever. The memory of what he had heard on the porch of his own house a few afternoons ago, of what he had seen at other times, of his wife's telltale behavior on this very evening, swept over him, fanning anew the sullen emotions he had cherished all these months. How far would this fellow dare to go, he wondered? What motive inspired him thus to pose before his friends, and openly goad his victim under the cloak of modesty and gratitude? Was he enhancing his triumph by jeering at the husband of whom he had made a fool? He dropped his eyes to hide the fury in them.

"I want to give you a little remembrance of my own." Anthony was speaking directly to him. "It isn't much, but it means a good deal to me, and I hope it will have some sort of personal association for you, Mr. Cortlandt." He drew from his pocket a plush case and took from it a very handsome thin Swiss watch with the letters "S. C." artfully enamelled upon the back. Runnels, who knew the local shops, wondered how it had been procured in Panama. The others openly expressed their admiration.

Cortlandt accepted the gift mechanically; then, as it touched his flesh, a sudden color mounted to his cheeks, only to recede, leaving them bloodless again. He stared at it uncertainly, then looked up and ran his eyes slowly around the table. They came to rest at last upon the broad frame of the giver, crowned with its handsome, sun−tanned face and close−cropped shock of yellow hair. Anthony was all that he was not—the very embodiment of youth, vigor, and confidence, while he was prematurely aged, worn, and impotent.

They noted how ill he appeared, as if he had suffered from a jungle fever, how his well−cut evening clothes

refused to conceal the frail lines of his figure, and how the hollows in his cheeks added to his age. But for the first time since they had known him they saw that his eyes were alive and burning dully.

"I really didn't expect this," he began, slowly, as he rose. "Anthony exaggerates; he is too kind. But since he has chosen to publicly call attention to our relations, I will confess that what he tells you is all true. He was everything he says when he first came to Panama. He did get into trouble, and I helped him out; he had no money, and I put him up as my guest; he needed work, and I helped to place him. Through my assistance—partly, at any rate— he has made a man of himself. He has been welcome at my house, at my table; he has come and gone as he pleased, like one of the family, you might say. But those are little things; they count for nothing." He smiled in a way that seemed ironical, his lips writhed away from his teeth until his visage resembled a death− head. His tone had gripped his hearers, and Anthony stirred uneasily, thinking this an odd way of accepting a gift.

Unclasping his long, white fingers, Cortlandt held up the watch to public view.

"In payment for my poor friendship he has given me this magnificent thing of gold and jewels, the finest I ever saw. I never counted upon such gratitude. It is too much, and yet a man cannot refuse the gift of his friend and not seem ungracious, can he? Somewhere in the Orient they have a custom of exchanging gifts. No man may accept a thing of value without making adequate return, and it has always struck me as a wise practice." He turned full upon Kirk for the first time since he had begun speaking, and his voice rose a tone as he said: "I can't let the obligation rest entirely upon me. We have been friends, Anthony, and I am going to give you something in return which I have prized highly; it would be counted of great value by some." Once more he paused and drew his lips back in that grimace of mockery—it could no longer be termed a smile. "It is this—I am going to give you—my wife. You have had her from the first, and now she is yours." For one frightful moment there was no sound; even the men's breathing was hushed, and they sat slack−jawed, stunned, half−minded to believe this some hideous, incredible jest. But the maniacal light in Cortlandt's eyes, and Anthony's chalk−white, frozen countenance soon showed them the truth. Some one gasped, another laughed hysterically, the sound breaking in his throat. Cortlandt turned away gloatingly.

Kirk was the last to recover his powers, but when they did revive they came with a prodigious rush. He plunged upward out of his chair with a cry like a wounded animal, and the others rose with him. The table rocked, something smashed, a chair was hurled backward. The room broke into instant turmoil. Kirk felt hands upon him, and then went blind with fury, struggling in a passion too strong for coherent speech. He was engulfed in chaos. He felt things break beneath his touch, felt bodies give way before him.

How or when Cortlandt left the room he never knew. Eventually he found himself pinned in his chair, with Runnels' white face close against his own and other hands upon his arms. His first frenzy quickly gave way to a sickening horror. Some one was commanding him to be still, to create no scene; but those were not words, they were simply mutterings that conveyed no meaning.

"It's a lie! The man's crazy!" he cried, hoarsely; then, as his companions drew away from him, he rose to his feet. "Why are you looking at me like that? I tell you it's a damned lie! I never—"

Runnels turned to the table, and with shaking hand put a glass to his lips and gulped its contents. Wade and Kimble exchanged glances, then, avoiding each other's eyes, took their hats from the hooks behind them.

"Wait! Bring him back!" Kirk mumbled. "I'll get him and make him say it's a lie." But still no one answered, no one looked at him. "God! You don't believe it?"

"I'm going home, fellows. I'm kind of sick," Kimble said. One of the others murmured unintelligibly, and, wetting a napkin, bound up his hand, which was bleeding. They continued to watch Kirk as if fearful of some insane action, yet they refused to meet his eyes squarely. There was no sympathy in their faces.

The knowledge of what these actions meant came to him slowly. Was it possible that his friends believed this incredible accusation? The thought made him furious, too agitated as yet to realize that such a charge made under such circumstances could not well prove less than convincing. As he began to collect himself he saw his plight more clearly. His first thought had been that Cortlandt was insane, but the man's actions were not those of a maniac. No! He actually believed and—and these fellows believed also. No doubt they would continue to think him guilty in spite of all that he could do or say; for after this shocking denunciation it would take more than mere words to prove that he had not betrayed his friend and benefactor. It was incredible, unbearable! He wanted to shout his innocence at them, to beat it into their heads; but the more he expostulated the more distant they became.

One by one they took their hats and went out, mumbling good−night to one another, as if intending to go home singly in order to avoid all discussion of this thing that had fallen among them Runnels alone remained.

"YOU don't believe I did—that?" Anthony asked, in a strained voice.

"I—I think I do." There was a miserable silence, and then: "It isn't the thing itself, you know, so much as the rotten— underhanded advantage you took. If he'd been a stranger, now— Honestly, isn't it true?"

Kirk shook his head, listlessly. "I wouldn't lie to you."

Runnels drew a deep breath.. "Oh, come, now, the man MUST have known what he was saying. Do you realize what it means—if—well, if he were mistaken? It would be bad enough if he were not, but this would be ten times worse. Don't you see?"

"I don't see much of anything yet. I'm stunned."

"Ugh! To make it public that way, he must be made of iron." Runnels shuddered; then, with cold eyes on Kirk, continued: "He must have known, Anthony. Men don't do things like that on suspicion."

"He misunderstood our friendship," said Kirk, heavily, then roused himself for a last plea. "Look here!" he cried. "You know Cortlandt and you know me. The man was insanely jealous! I know it sounds weak, but it's the truth, and it's all I can say. I'll go mad if you doubt me."

Runnels' face showed the pain he felt, but his eyes looked incredulous.

"Another thing," Kirk went on, desperately: "do you suppose that if what you believe were true I could have the inhuman nerve to come here to−night? That would make me a fool or a monster!"

"I don't know," said Runnels.

"You do know. You know ME. If we weren't such friends I wouldn't argue with you like this, but—I can't bear it. And to−night of all—" He broke off sharply. "My God! I'd forgotten that I'm married! Suppose Gertrudis hears of this! If it ever gets to her— I—believe I could kill him."

"Don't talk like that."

"I never really thought I could take a person's life, but if she heard she might believe; everybody else seems to believe. Understand, she hardly knows me. She might—she might—" Anthony seized his temples in despair.

Runnels took a sudden illogical decision. He never knew exactly what had influenced him, but his whole past knowledge of Anthony surged up in him with a force that he could not resist. He found that he could not really believe him capable of this abomination any more than he could believe it of himself. Little of our life is ruled by reason, and it is something else than logic that produces the last feeling of conviction. Here, this something was present where logic was lacking.

He laid his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Take it easy, old man," he said. "I believe you. I've always known that they didn't get along together, although—well, I won't try to understand it. He may not do anything further, and these fellows won't mention what happened here; they can't."

"You know we're only half married," moaned Kirk, hardly heeding him. "Women are apt to be jealous, aren't they, Runnels? What do you suppose she'd do?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm thinking about Cortlandt. If he finds out he's mistaken, what will HE do?"

"He'll have to find out. I'm going to tell him. His wife will tell him. Good God! Do you see what an awful light it puts me in? You don't doubt me, do you, really, old man?"

"No—but what a night this has been! It seems a year old. Come along, now, you must get out of here. You must turn in."

"Oh, I don't feel as if I'd ever sleep again until this thing is cleared up." His anguish swept over him in a fresh tide. "Those boys think I did that trick to the man who befriended me!"

"Well, don't let's talk about it any more; we can't stay here all night, anyhow. The waiters are wondering what this row is about. I think we'd better take a walk." Runnels dragged his companion out, trying to calm him as best he could.

In passing through the deserted lobby of the hotel, they saw Clifford idling about; but they were too much absorbed to wonder what had kept him up so late. By the clock across the Plaza they saw it was two hours after midnight as they stepped into the street; then, finding no coaches in sight, they set out to walk toward Ancon, both badly in need of the open air.

A moment later Clifford followed them, taking pains to keep at a distance.

Now that the full import of Cortlandt's accusation had sunk into his mind, Kirk lapsed into a mood of sullen

bitterness. He said little, but his set face worried his companion, who was loath to bid him goodnight even when they were close to the Tivoli. After they had parted Runnels was upon the point of going back and offering to spend the night with him, but thought better of it. After all, he reflected, his apprehensions were probably quite unfounded. Anthony was too sensible a chap to do anything he might repent of, now that his gust of passion had died down. So he went on homeward wondering vaguely how Cortlandt would dare to meet his wife, or, if he really found himself mistaken, how he could ever summon courage to look his hosts in the face.

Instead of passing through the office, Kirk mounted to the porch of the Tivoli and entered his room from the outside, as he and Chiquita had done earlier that evening. He found Allan waiting, and bursting with a desire to gossip, but cut him short.

"Get my street−clothes, I'm going out." He tore the white tie from his throat as if it were choking him.

"It is too late, sar. You will be h'exposing yourself to a fever in the mist," expostulated the boy; but Kirk would not hear argument.

"Come along if you want to, I can't sleep. I want to walk—walk until I'm tired."

Mystified and frightened at this behavior, Allan obeyed. "Never have I h'observed you so h'angry, boss," he observed. "Is it Ramon Alfarez?" His eyes began to roll in excitement, for the spectacle of his master's agitation never failed to work upon him powerfully.

"No, not Ramon; another. I've been hurt, Allan. I can't explain, for you wouldn't understand, but I've been hurt."

The negro's lips drew apart in an expression of ape−like ferocity, and he began to chatter threats of vengeance, to which Kirk paid little heed. A few moments later they went out quietly, and together took the rock road down toward the city, the one silent and desperate, the other whining like a hound nearing a scent.

XXVII. A QUESTION

Edith Cortlandt did not retire immediately upon her return from the ball. Her anger at Anthony's behavior kept her wakeful, and the night had turned off so dead and humid that sleep was in any case a doubtful possibility. It was the lifeless period between seasons when the trades had died out, or, at best, veered about bafflingly, too faint to offer relief. The cooling rains had not set in as yet, and a great blanket of heat wrapped the city in its smothering folds. The air was still and tainted, like that of a sick−room. Through Mrs. Cortlandt's open windows came hardly a sound; even from the sea below rose only a faint hissing, as if the rocks at the water's edge were superheated. Earlier in the evening the temperature had been bearable, but now it had reached an intensity to strain tired nerves to the snapping−point. It was the sort of night in which ailing children die and strong minds feel the burden of living. No relief was to be had, and the slightest physical effort was a misery.

She was still sitting there at a late hour when she heard the outside door close and Cortlandt's footsteps mounting the stairs. She was glad he had his own room and never entered hers at such an hour, for even to talk with him in her present state of mind and body would have been more than she could bear.

She was unreasonably annoyed, therefore, when he came boldly into her chamber without even knocking, for all the world like a welcome lover. To conceal her irritation, she kept her face turned from him and continued fanning herself listlessly. She was reclining in a wicker chair, lightly clad in a filmy silk negligee, which she mechanically drew closer.

"Rather late for good−nights," she said, coldly.

"I've just come from Anthony's supper−party."

His voice made her look round sharply. She saw that his linen, ordinarily stiff and immaculate, was sodden and crumpled, his collar limp, his forehead glistening with drops of moisture. She could not remember ever having seen him in such a state. His appearance affected her queerly. In him this dishevelment was shocking.

"What ails you, Stephen?" she cried. "Have you been drinking?"

"No. I didn't drink much. I brought you something."

He took the loving−cup from its flannel bag and set it upon the table. "They gave me this."

"It is very pretty, though I don't care for such things."

"And this too." He tossed the watch with its enamelled monogram into her lap.

"Ah! That's very handsome."

"Yes, I thought you'd like it; it's from Anthony." He laughed, then shuddered, as though a cold wind had bitten through his sodden garments.

"Why—you seem excited over these souvenirs. You surely expected— "

He broke in—a thing he rarely did while she was speaking:

"Anthony made a speech when he gave it to me—a very nice speech, full of friendship and love and gratitude." He repeated Kirk's words as he remembered them, "What do you think of that?"

"I think he expressed himself very frankly. But why do you tell me now, when the morning will do just as well? I'm prostrated with this heat."

"He actually acknowledged his debt in public."

Mrs. Cortlandt's eyes widened. This was not the man she knew. At this moment he was actually insistent, almost overbearing, and he was regarding her with that same ironical sneer that had roused her anger earlier in the evening.

"Well, come to the point," she cried, irritably. "I don't understand what you are getting at. If you didn't wish to accept anything from him, why did you go?"

He began to chuckle, apparently without reason. His shoulders shook, feebly at first, then more violently; his flat chest heaved, and he hiccoughed as if from physical weakness. It was alarming, and she rose, staring at him affrightedly. The sight of her increased his mirthless laughter. He continued to shudder and shake in uncontrollable hysteria, but his eyes were bright and watchful.

"Oh, I—I—took it all in—I let him p−put the noose around his own neck and tie the knot. Then I hung him." His convulsive giggling was terrible, forecasting, as it did, his immediate breakdown.

"Stephen!" she exclaimed, in a shocked tone, convinced that his mind was going. "You are ill, you need a doctor. I will call Joceel." She laid her hand on his arm.

But he sniggered: "N−no! No! I'm all right. I t−t−t−t—" A stuttering−fit seized him; then, with an effort of will, he calmed himself. "Don't think I'm crazy. I was never more sane, never cooler, in here." He tapped his head with his finger. "But I'm tired, that's all, tired of waiting."

"Won't you go to your room and let me call a doctor?"

"Not yet. Wait! He told them what I had done for him, how I'd made a man of him when he was broke and friendless, how I'd taken him into my home like one of my family, and then I went him one better. I acknowledged it all and made them hear it from my lips too. Then—" He paused, and she steeled herself to witness another spectacle of his pitiable loss of self−control. But instead he grew icy and corpse−like, with lips drawn back in a grin. "What do you think I said? Can't you guess? I couldn't let him get away with that, could I? I played with him the way you have played with me. Think!"

Her face went suddenly ashen. He stood before her grimly triumphant, enjoying his sense of mastery and deliberately prolonging her suspense.

"Well, I told him before them all that I intended to give him something in return, and I did. I—gave—him—YOU."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

He nodded. "I said he'd had you from the first and that now I'd give you to him."

She gave an unintelligible cry, standing now, as if petrified. He went on:

"I knew all the time that I was in the way, but my work is done at last, so I'll step out. But—you both got more than you bargained for, didn't you?"

"God! You didn't tell him that? You didn't say THAT—before those men! Oh−h!" She shrank back, drawing the gauzy silk robe closer about her breast. Her hands were shaking, her hair, which had fallen free when she rose, cascaded about her neck and shoulders. She let her eyes wander about the room as if to assure herself that this was not some hideous nightmare. Then she roused to sudden action. Seizing him by the shoulders she shook him roughly with far more than her natural strength, voicing furious words which neither of them understood.

"Oh, I did it," he declared. "He's yours now. You can have him. He's been your lover—"

She flung him away from her so violently that he nearly fell.

"It's a lie! You know it's a lie!"

"It's true. I'm no fool."

She beat her hands together distractedly, "What have you done? What will those men think? Listen! You must stop them quickly. Tell them it's not so."

He seemed not to hear her. "I'm going away to−morrow," he said, "but I'll never divorce you, no matter what you do; and I won't let you divorce me, either. No, no! Take him now, if you want him, but you'll never be able to marry him until I'm gone. And I won't die soon—I promise you that, I'm going to live."

"You can't go—"

"There's a boat to−morrow."

"Don't you see you must stay and explain to those men? My God! They'll think you spoke the truth; they'll BELIEVE what you said."

"Of course they will," he chattered, shrilly. "That's why I did it in that way. No matter what you or he or I can do or say now, they'll believe it forever. It came to me like a flash of light, and I saw what it meant all in a minute. Do YOU understand what it means, eh? Listen! No matter how you behave, they'll know. They won't say anything, but they'll know, and you can't stand that, can you? Even if you could fool me once more against the evidence of my own eyes and ears, and convince me that your lies are true, it wouldn't do any good with them."

"'Evidence!' You have no evidence."

"No? What about that night at Taboga? You were mad over the fellow then, but you didn't think I saw. That day I caught you together in the jungle—have you forgotten that? Didn't you think it strange that I should be the one to discover you? Oh, I pretended to be blind, but I followed you everywhere I could, and I kept my eyes open."

"You saw nothing, for there was nothing."

"He's been with you day and night. You have been together constantly, and I knew what was going on. But I

waited, because I wasn't strong enough to revolt—until to−night. Oh, but to−night I was strong! Something gave me courage."

In all their married life she had never known him to show such stubborn force. He was like granite, and the unbelievable change in him, upsetting all her preconceived notions of the man, appalled her. There had been times in the past when they had clashed, but he had never really matched his will with hers, and she had judged him weak and spiritless. Now, therefore, failing to dominate him as usual, she was filled with a strange feeling of helplessness and terror.

"You had no right to accept such evidence," she stormed.

"Bah! Why try to fool me? I have your own words for it. The other afternoon I came home sick—with my head. I was on the gallery outside when you were pleading with him, and I heard it all. You talked that night about Taboga, your guilty kisses and other things; you acknowledged everything. But he was growing tired of you. That, you know, makes it all the more effective." He smiled in an agonized fury.

"You—cur!" she cried, with the fury of one beating barehanded at a barred door. "You had no right to do such a thing even if I were guilty."

"Right? Aren't you my wife?"

The look she gave him was heavy with loathing. "That means nothing with us. I never loved you, and you know it. You know, too, why I married you. I made no secret of it at the time. You had what I wanted, and I had what you wanted; but you were content with the bargain because I gave you money, position, and power. I never promised anything more than that. I made you into something like a man. You never could have succeeded without me. All you have is due to me—even your reputation in the service. Your success, your influence, it is all mine, and the only thing you gave me was a name; any other would have done as well."

He shrank a little under this tirade, despite his exaltation.

"Marriage!" she continued, in bitter scorn. "A priest mumbled something over us, but it meant nothing then or now. I have tolerated you because you were useful. I have carried you with me as I carry a maid or a butler. I bought a manikin and dressed it up and put breath into it for my own convenience, and I owe you nothing, do you understand—nothing! The debt is all on your side, as you and I and all the world know."

"Who made me a manikin?" he demanded, with womanish fury, a fury that had been striving for utterance these many years. "I had ambitions and hopes and ability once—not much, perhaps, but enough—before you married me. I was nothing great, but I was getting along. I had confidence, too, but you took it away from me. You—you absorbed me. You had your father's brain, and it was too big for me; it overshadowed mine. In a way you were a vampire; for what I had you drained me of. At first it was terrible to feel that I was inferior, but I loved you, and although I had some pride—" He choked an instant and threw back her incredulous stare defiantly. "I let myself be eliminated. You thought you were doing me a favor when you put me forward as a figurehead, but to me it was a tragedy. I COULDN'T HELP LETTING YOU DO IT. Do you realize what that means to a fellow? I quit fighting for my own individuality, I became colored by you, I took on your ways, your habits, your mental traits, and—all the time I knew what was happening. God! How I struggled to remain Stephen Cortlandt, but it would have taken a BIG man to mould you to his ways, and I was only average. I began to do your work in your particular style; I forgot my ambitions and my dreams and took up yours. That's what I fell to, and all the time I KNEW it, and—and all the time I knew you neither cared nor understood. My only consolation was the thought that even though you never had loved me and never could, you at least respected our relation. I clung to that miserably, for it was all I had left, all that made me seem like a man. And yet you took away even that. I tried to rebel, but I had been drugged too long. You saw Anthony, and he had the things I lack; you found you were not a machine, but a living woman. He discovered the secret I had wasted away in searching for, and you rewarded him. Oh, I saw the change in you quickly enough, and if I'd been a man instead of what I was, I'd have—but I wasn't. I went spying around like a woman, hating myself for permitting it to go on, but lacking strength to stop it. But to−night, when he got up before those other men and dangled my shame before my eyes, I had enough manhood left in me to strike back. Thank God for that at least! Maybe it's not too late yet; maybe if I get away from you and try—" His voice died out weakly; in his face there was a miserable half−gleam of hope.

"I never knew you felt like that. I never knew you COULD feel that way," she said, in a colorless voice. "But you made a terrible mistake."

"Do you mean to say you don't love him?"

"No, I have loved him for a long time—I can't remember when it began." She spoke very listlessly, looking past him as if at a long−familiar picture which she was tired of contemplating. "I never knew what love was before; I never even dreamed. I'd give my life right now—to undo what you have done, just for his sake, for he is innocent. Oh, don't sneer; it's true. He loves the Garavel girl, and wants to marry her."

"I know all that. I overheard you in the parlor below."

"Listen, please! I don't remember what I said then, and it doesn't matter; you took too much for granted. We must talk plainly now, before"—she pressed her palms to her temples as if they were bursting—"before it becomes impossible. I never lied to you, Stephen. Is that true?"

"I used to think so."

"I'm going to tell you the whole truth now without sparing myself. It began, I think, at Taboga, that night when he kissed me. It was the only time he ever did such a thing. It was dark, we were alone, I was frightened, and it was purely impulse on his part. But it woke me up, and all at once I knew how much he meant to me. I would have yielded utterly to him then if he had let me, but he was panic−stricken. He spoke of you, he apologized; I never saw a man in more misery. When I had time to realize the truth I tried to fight it off. But it was no use, and at last I gave up. After that I put myself in his way deliberately. I offered him opportunities continually, but he never seemed to see them. That day in the jungle I was desperate at his indifference, and I drove the horses away when he wasn't looking. I struck them with my crop—and I actually threw myself at him as boldly as I could, regardless of consequences. But he was like ice; he was speaking of you when you came. It has always been the same. When I discovered that he cared for that girl—well, if you overheard you must know. I frightened Garavel into dismissing him, and I set out to break him, just to show him that he needed me. To−night I offered to divorce you and make him all and more than I've made you, but he scorned me. That's the truth, Stephen. If we believed in oaths, I would swear it."

No one who knew the woman could have disbelieved her, and to the husband who knew her every mental and moral trait this bald, hopeless confession came as a crushing anti−climax to his great effort. It left him not the slightest doubt that she was honest. He said, dully, in a feeble attempt to right himself:

"You are shielding him. You want to make me out wrong." But she knew he knew.

"Those are the facts. Heaven knows they are bad enough, but they are by no means so bad as you thought. And I'm your wife, Stephen. That thing you did was brutal; those men will talk. I was guilty, no doubt, in my thoughts, but I'm young, and you have no right to blight my life and my reputation—yes, and yours—by a thing like that. We will have to meet those men. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "In all my life I never felt but one moment of power, and that, it seems, was false. For years I have longed to show myself a man, and now—what have I done? What have I done? I am no monster." He moaned and sank limply into a chair, folding together in an attitude of dejection that was pitiful. He raised his head and broke out at her in a last spasm of desperation, as a dying ember flares even while it crumbles. "My God! why couldn't you be consistent? Why did you go half−way? Why couldn't you be all good or all bad and save me this?"

"All women are half good and half bad."

"I can't blame you for not loving me, I suppose," he mumbled. "No woman of your kind could love a man like me."

"Those men!" she said, in a way that made him writhe.

"Wait until I—think. I must think."

"You can't think now, and neither can I."

"We must." He wrung his hands. "They'll never believe me—" There was a long silence.

"Perhaps in the morning we can see a way out."

"That's it." He nodded. "You go to bed and I'll think. I'm trying to think now, but this heat is suffocating me and my head is tired." He brushed a hand feebly across his brow. "If it would only rain I—could think better."

"Yes, and we must think of Anthony, too. No matter how you blame me, you must realize that he was innocent, and perhaps, after all, he is the one that you wronged deepest. He will have to meet those men, and they were his friends."

Despite the breathless oppression of the night, she shivered. "*I* never can meet them now, and I don't see how you will dare to, knowing that you were wrong."

"Don't!" he pleaded. "The other was bad enough, but this—Tell me what to do!"

"I can't. I don't know myself. All I can see is that those men will never cease to believe, no matter what you tell them." She groped her way to the window, but there was no relief even in the open air. By−and−by she heard him sigh, then rise and say "Good− night."

As she prepared for bed an hour later she heard him still stirring about in his quarters, but afterward, as she lay staring into the black night, she was so busied with the frightful fancies that swarmed about her that she did not detect his cautious footsteps when he stole out of his chamber, closing the door softly behind him.

XXVIII. THE ANSWER

Kirk was roused from a heavy, senseless slumber the next morning by a vigorous rapping at his door. He lay still for a time, vaguely resentful of the noise, then glanced at his watch, and found, with a shock, that it was quite late. Realizing only that he was due at the office, he leaped out of bed. He opened the door and Runnels rushed in.

"Have you heard?"

"I heard your infernal pounding; that's what woke me up."

Runnels calmed his excitement, which Kirk now observed was intense.

"Where did you go after I left you last night?"

"I came here, of course." As the memory of the previous night swept over him he scowled.

"Did you stay here?"

"No. I went out again, and was out nearly all night trying to walk it off."

Runnels' face blanched, and he drew back.

"Then of course you know?"

"What?"

"About Cortlandt. He's dead!"

It was Kirk's turn to start and grow pale. The last cobweb was swept from his brain, and he gasped:

"DEAD! When? Where? How did it happen?"

"Nobody knows just how. He was found on the sea−wall near Alfarez' house, shot."

"Shot! Good Lord!"

"It happened some time early this morning, and the whole city is talking about it. I came to you the first thing."

"We'd better hurry down there. Mrs. Cortlandt must be all broken up." Kirk began to dress hastily, but paused as his friend stammered:

"Wait! I—I—let's understand each other first. I met Wade just now. The news has rattled him, and he's been talking."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you see Cortlandt again after I left you?" Runnels swallowed hard.

Kirk whirled about and faced him. "Great heavens! No! See here, that idea is ridiculous."

Runnels sank weakly into a chair and mopped his face. "I'm glad to hear you say that. It frightened me just the same, for I remembered you acted so queerly when I left you, and Wade seemed to think, perhaps—When you said you'd gone out again, it knocked me flat, understand?"

"I can prove where I was, for Allan was with me. I couldn't sleep, so I tried to walk off my excitement. No, no. I couldn't do a thing like that. I thought last night that I could, but—I couldn't, really."

"I'm afraid Wade will tell all about the party if we don't stop him."

"Then we'd better hunt him up." Kirk resumed his dressing, while Runnels consulted his watch.

"No. 5 is due in twenty minutes. We'll probably find him at the office."

Together they hastened to the railroad building, Runnels telling all he knew of the tragedy as they went along. Cortlandt's body, it seemed, had been found about daylight by a Spiggoty policeman, who had identified it. Becoming panic−stricken at the importance of his discovery, he had sounded the alarm, then reported directly to the Governor, whose house was close by. It was General Alfarez himself who had informed Mrs. Cortlandt over the telephone of her husband's death. The whole city was alive with the news, the police were buzzing like bees. Rumors of suicide, murder, robbery were about, but no one seemed to know anything definite. Colonel Jolson in his motor−car had just come from Culebra, and Colonel Bland was on No. 5 from Gatun, hence Runnels' desire to be at the station.

"It was suicide," Kirk averred, with conviction. "The man was insane last night, and that accounts for what he said about me. He's been sick for a long time."

"If those boys will only keep their mouths shut!" Runnels said, anxiously. "There's no telling what these Spiggoties might do if they heard about that row."

"Cortlandt was an American."

"But it happened in Panama, and it would be their affair."

Although it was Sunday, the four young fellows who had taken part in the entertainment on the night before had gathered in the office, and at the appearance of Runnels greeted him eagerly. Toward Kirk, however, they maintained a disheartening constraint.

The Acting Superintendent began to caution them tersely.

"Boys, there's no use to tell you that we must keep still about what happened last night. Kirk thinks Cortlandt's mind was unbalanced; but whether it was or not, he left a widow, and what went on at that supper must never leak out."

"Why do you think he was crazy?" Wade inquired.

"His actions last night would show it," Kirk answered. "The man must have been out of his mind to believe or to say such a thing."

"You mean, then, that he shot himself?"

Kirk nodded.

"I don't agree with you. I've seen crazy people, but he was as sane as any of us. And I don't believe in secrecy, either. I think we ought to be entirely frank about the matter. The truth never hurt anybody."

"It's a bad business," said Runnels, "and it's something I for one don't want to be mixed up in. I've heard rumors already about some sort of a quarrel at our party, so I'm afraid you fellows have been talking."

Wade acknowledged it recklessly. "Yes, I'll answer for my part, and I'm not going to make any promise of secrecy, either. If that affair had anything to do with Steve Cortlandt's death, it ought to be known, so the man who did it can be made to answer."

Into the office behind them came Ramon Alfarez and two Panamanian policemen, one evidently a sergeant.

"Eh, there you are!" Alfarez cried, as he caught sight of Kirk. Then he said something in Spanish to the sergeant, who advanced and laid hands upon the American. "You are arrest'."

"What for?"

"Gentlemen, you will be so kind as to geeve the names, yes? The jodge will desire to make inquiries regarding those sopper to Senor Cortlan' las' night."

"What am I arrested for?" Kirk demanded.

"Come! You are arrest'. That is enough."

At that moment the building began to shake and reverberate, as No. 5 rolled in from Colon, bearing John Weeks, American Consul, and Mr. Williams, of St. Louis, in one of the forward coaches. As the two hurried out through the turnstiles, they found the street blocked by a considerable crowd, evidently interested in something quite apart from the arrival of the morning train. But before they could learn the cause, out from the near−by building came Ramon Alfarez, accompanied by several policemen and a group of railroad employes, among whom was Kirk Anthony.

"There he is!" wheezed the consul, clutching at his companion's arm. "Get him now, before his friends." But Williams had been even quicker of eye than his fat guide, and was plunging through the crowd toward his quarry. He thrust the policemen and the curious onlookers aside and, laying hold of Anthony, cried in triumph:

"Well, Mr. Jefferson Locke, I want you."

"Hello, Williams! You got around finally, didn't you?" Kirk smiled at him.

A little man in blue uniform was attempting to take the prisoner in charge, but the detective disregarded him.

"It won't do you any good to resist," he went on. "I've come to get you."

Runnels elbowed his way forward with a question.

"Oh, I've got a warrant for him," Williams declared. "What for? Well, for one thing he embezzled eighty thousand dollars, and I'm going to take him back."

"Eh? W'at is this?" Alfarez bustled into the conversation. "Embezzle? He is then a t'ief?"

"Exactly. If you're the inspector I'll ask you to make this arrest for me. I believe we're on foreign ground."

"That's right, Alfarez," came the voice of John Weeks, anxious to have a word in the affair. "I'll vouch for Mr. Williams. This chap is a smooth one, but his name isn't Anthony at all, nor Locke, either; it's Wellar; and he's wanted for other things besides embezzlement." Turning his triumphant little red eyes upon the prisoner, he puffed, "Got you, didn't we?"

"I regret you 'ave arrive' so late," smirked Alfarez. "The gentleman is already arrest' for the murder of Senor Cortlan'. He will first answer to that, I assure you."

Kirk nodded. "Too bad, Williams! I'm sorry you didn't come last night."

They went on down the street, leaving the detective staring and Weeks open−mouthed.

"Cortlandt murdered!" the consul gasped. "Lord! And to think I nourished that viper at my breast."

Williams wheeled and cursed the fat man furiously. It was during the lunch−hour that Ramon Alfarez called at the Garavel home, finding the banker and his daughter still loitering over their midday meal and discussing the topic that had electrified the whole city.

"Ah, Ramon!" the old gentleman began, eagerly. "Be seated and tell us quickly the latest news. A terrible thing, was it not, this death of our good friend? I have been to see his unfortunate widow, but even yet I cannot believe it to be true."

"Yes. A terrible thing! It was only last night that we saw him well and happy."

Although Alfarez was trembling with eagerness to tell his news, he also meant to extract the greatest possible satisfaction from it, and now bent an inquiring glance upon Gertrudis. His look turned to one of malicious triumph as he saw that he was, indeed, the first to bring the tidings of Anthony's arrest; for the girl's acceptance of his suit had by no means wiped out the memory of her momentary preference for his rival, and he had hastened hither straight from the police barracks, delighting in the chance to make her suffer.

"So fine a man," the father was saying. "He was, indeed, my good friend. It is shocking."

"Yes, and to think he should have been killed in this cowardly manner!"

"Killed! Is it believed that he was murdered? Caramba! I supposed he had shot himself. That was the gossip an hour ago." Garavel was deeply affected, and motioned for the dishes in front of him to be removed.

Ramon nodded. "There are suspicious circumstances, it seems. Last night, after the ball, he had a serious quarrel—one of those American fights, almost. That much is known."

Gertrudis, who had remained silent until now, her dark eyes clouded with distress, said, sympathetically:

"And the poor lady! She must suffer terribly."

"Ah, perhaps! One cannot always tell!" Ramon shrugged and smiled.

"What do you mean?" cried Garavel. "This quarrel you speak of? Continue, Ramon, I am consumed with eagerness."

"Upon leaving the Tivoli last night, Senor Cortlan' dined with six of his friends at the Central. There was drinking. The waiters have been questioned; also, one of the men who was present has recounted to me what occurred. It seems that for a long time Senor Cortlan' has been jealous of his wife."

"Impossible! Jealous? My dear Ramon, an admirable lady."

"I—I shall leave you, perhaps?" questioned Gertrudis, modestly, as she rose, but Ramon exclaimed:

"No, no! By all means remain. I have remarkable things to disclose, amazing news that will interest you. There was a serious altercation, and Senor Cortlan' openly accused his enemy before all the others. It was most dramatic, it was terrible! There was a scene of violence, the other man made threats."

Garavel breathed an incredulous exclamation.

"Ah, but wait! It was Senor Cortlan's best friend, too, the man for whom he had accomplished many favors whom he accused." He noted with mingled anger and satisfaction the pallor that was creeping into the girl's cheeks. "You would never guess. It was—I hesitate, and yet you are bound to learn, my dear friends, it was this Ant'ony."

His moment had indeed been worth waiting for. It even went far to atone for the sense of injury under which he smarted; for the banker was stricken speechless, and his daughter went deathly white. Her eyes began to fill with horror.

Garavel was the first to recover himself. "Infamous! It is unbelievable! The wretch, then, had betrayed his friend."

"He is indeed a villain. That much I have always known."

"It is a lie!" said the girl, quietly. She had risen and was standing straight, a tragic little figure.

"Gertrudis!" her father admonished. "You hear what Ramon has said."

"Yes!" said Ramon. "He deceived Senor Cortlan' very nicely; it had been going on for months."

"It is a lie!" she repeated. "He loved no one but me."

"Gertrudis!" The banker was shocked beyond measure at what he considered his daughter's jealousy. "Those are not nice words. He told you so, yes; but if he would betray his best friend, he would deceive you also. It was our great good−fortune to be done with him in time. You will see now that I did well in sending him off— eh, Chiquita?"

"No! I do not believe you."

Ramon had not counted upon such a spirit, and, his anger getting the better of him, he sneered: "I should not have spoken. I did not know you still care."

"She does not care," Garavel declared, loudly.

"Ah, but I do. I love him very dearly."

The two men were upon their feet in an instant, staring at her, the elder in amazement, the younger with rage and resentment blazing from his countenance.

"Silence!" thundered the banker. "Yonder stands your affianced husband."

"It is a mistake—" she persisted, gently.

"No, no, no! There is no mistake," chattered Ramon. "Those other men have told all, and your Ant'ony is now in the Carcel under guard. It was I who saw to his arrest." The slender figure swayed, a tiny olive hand fluttered to her breast.

"Ramon, you must not heed her, she is upset. This is but a girl's foolish fancy, and it will pass. The man was handsome, and he cast a spell over her."

"Nor is that all," Ramon ran on, excitedly. "He is not at all the man he pretended to be, even his name is false. This morning there arrived an American officer of police to arrest him on other charges. He is a thief, it seems, having stolen eighty thousand dollars 'gold' from his employers. Oh, there is no mistake. Within the hour I have been talking with this detective, and he has the papers of proof. It will be in the newspapers, every one will know shortly. Last night, when Senor Cortlan' made his accusation, there was a frightful quarrel, and Ant'ony swore to kill him. At dawn the poor husband is found shot on the sea wall. Is not that enough?"

"It is indeed!" gasped the father. "You see, then, my child, from what you were saved. This should be a day of thanksgiving to you as it is to me. For this deliverance I shall erect a cross of stone on the hill by our house, so that all our lives we may offer a prayer when our eyes rest upon it. Come, now, it is Ramon who has unmasked this person. Have you no thanks to give him?"

"But it is not true," maintained the girl, simply, and her eyes were as steady as altar flames.

"Eh? Well! He is in the barracks at this moment," snarled Ramon, "and there he shall remain, I promise you, until he goes to Chiriqui or—"

Gertrudis turned to her father.

"Take me to him, please. I must go at once to the Carcel."

But he only answered her with a stare of amazement. "Go!" he murmured, after an instant. "Have I lost my senses?" He began to summon his indignation for a terrific outburst.

"Yes, I must go, for he is my husband. We were wed last night."

There was a moment of absolute silence, during which the clatter of a passing coach sounded loudly in the room. Then—

"Mother of God!" the banker ejaculated, hoarsely, and sank into the seat from which he had arisen. Ramon was staring from one to the other, his head turning jerkily.

The girl raised her face proudly. "Yes! I am his wife, although I had not expected to tell you so soon; therefore, you see I must go to him quickly, or he will think I believe these lies."

"You are mad! Do you know what you are saying?"

"Oh yes. The judge from Colon married us during the dance. I would have liked a church wedding; but that will come later. The Senor Ronnels and his wife were there also, and they will tell you. It made me very happy. You see, I prayed the Virgin that I might be happy, and she heard. Oh, I offered so many prayers, and all last night I lay awake giving thanks for my great happiness, which even yet I cannot believe." Her face was transfigured by a look that left the two men no choice but to believe.

"A civil marriage!" stammered Ramen.

"A civil marriage, indeed!" said Garavel, in a choking voice. "So that is where you were when I believed you to be dancing!" He burst forth violently, pounding the table with his clenched fist until the dishes danced, his

brilliant black eyes flashing beneath their thatch of white. "But I will not have it, understand! You are betrothed. You have given your word to Ramon."

"Ah, but I never loved him. You compelled me to consent, because you said you could not be President unless I married him. And that was not so. Ramon deceived you. Now it is all right. You will be President, and I can be happy."

Ramon's suspicion kindled on the instant. He turned upon the banker. "So! I begin to see! That was a trick, then, to betray my father."

"But wait!" Gertrudis exclaimed, sharply. "Did you not trick us also? Did you not use the General, your father, to make me give up the man I love? Which of us, then, is the better?"

Andres Garavel spoke threateningly, menacingly, to his daughter. "Enough! Our word was given, and you have broken it! You have brought disgrace to our name. Can a Garavel be President of the Republic with his daughter wed to a murderer?"

"He is not that!"

"It was no marriage, and it will not stand. I will have it annulled. Such things are easily done, Ramon. She is no wife. The man was a criminal, a fugitive, even when he forced her to marry— "

"No, no! You cannot do that. It was I who asked him to marry me." The girl lied tremulously, panic−stricken at the threat. "Before God, I am his wife!" she maintained. "And if this marriage has a flaw, then I will stand beside the prison gates and remarry him as he comes forth."

"He will not come forth," Ramon declared, harshly.

"Oh yes! And now will you take me to him?"

"NO!" her father bellowed. "You are my daughter, you are under my roof, and here you shall stay until you give up this madness and this man."

"That I can never do," she retorted, proudly. "You see, I am not all Spanish, I have in me also the blood of his people, and that makes me steadfast. I could not doubt him if I wished."

"I forbid you to go near him. Come! Do you promise?" She inclined her dark head. "I must learn more of this affair at once. You will find your senses, miss, or if you do not you will spend your life in meditation and prayer—that much I promise you."

"I do not wish to enter a convent," she said, with white lips. "I wish to be happy. When Keerk is free I shall go to him. Now, if you please, I—think I shall go away." She turned and went out of the big high−ceilinged room, and not until she had reached the hall did her feet waver or her head droop.

When the two men were alone, Garavel said, brokenly: "She is the first to bring disgrace upon our name. Is there absolute proof that the man is guilty, Ramon?"

"Proof?" Alfarez turned dazed eyes from the door through which Gertrudis had gone. "Proof? I believe so. I have not thought much of the matter as yet, but—I think there will be proof in plenty. Oh yes!"

"Come then. I must go to see him. Perhaps—oh, God! Perhaps what? My head is afire, my heart is broken for you, my poor boy."

XXIX. A LAST APPEAL

That was not a pleasant interview for Anthony. His surroundings were not such as to lend him assurance, and Garavel's grief at his daughter's disgrace was really distressing. Moreover, the unequivocal threat to annul the marriage filled him with alarm. His only consolation came from the fact that Gertrudis had made known the truth without the slightest hesitation. That showed that she was loyal, at any rate. Kirk tried to assure his caller that he would have no trouble in proving his innocence, but Garavel seemed very little concerned with that phase of the affair, and continued to bewail the dishonor that had fallen upon his name.

Kirk's pride arose at this, and he exclaimed with some heat:

"My dear Mr. Garavel, if you are so blamed sure that I did all these things, why did you come to see me?"

"It was to learn if she spoke the truth."

"Oh, we're married, right enough. And you'll have some difficulty in breaking it up before I get out."

"You expect, then, to prove your innocence easily?"

"I do."

"But I hear there are other serious charges."

"It is quite the same with them."

"But—suppose you should not clear yourself of this—murder—would you wish to drag down my daughter's name?"

"Of course not."

"I understand you have not spoken of this marriage. Perhaps you might consent to remain silent. If by any chance you should be convicted of guilt, what satisfaction could you derive from injuring me and mine?"

"None at all, sir."

"I am rich," Garavel went on, meaningly. "If you are acquitted, I might, perhaps, arrange amply for your future—upon conditions."

"In other words, if I am to be hanged or shot or whatever it is they do to people down here, you'll expect me to keep my mouth shut on general principles, and if I'm acquitted you'll pay me well to disappear. Is that it? Well, there is some family pride to that." He laughed lightly.

"My political future may depend upon it."

"If I can help you in that way I'll gladly keep silent as long as you wish, but I don't think I care to make any further terms."

"Make sure of this," snapped the father, "your marriage will be annulled, no matter what you prove or fail to prove. Already Chiquita is repentant, and I shall not rest until she is free. You have done me a great injury, and I shall not forget it."

On the following morning the leading American attorney of the city called at the jail, announcing that he had been retained as counsel, but refusing to tell who had employed him. Supposing, of course, that he had been sent by friends who wished no publicity in the matter, Kirk did not press him for information. Together they outlined their defence as best they could. With characteristic optimism, Kirk insisted upon treating the charge against him as of little consequence, and it was not until he had undergone his preliminary hearing that he fully realized the gravity of his situation.

To his unspeakable indignation, the officer who had discovered Cortlandt's body swore that he had seen the deceased pass him shortly before the time of his death, evidently taking a walk along the water's edge for relief from the heat, and that immediately afterward—perhaps a minute or so—the prisoner had also passed, going in the same direction! There was a street light close by, he said, and there could be no possible mistake as to Anthony's identity. A few moments later there had been a pistol− shot, muffled, but unmistakable, and the policeman had hastened in the direction from which it came. The prisoner had appeared suddenly out of the darkness and hurried past. In the politest manner possible, the witness declared, he had questioned him regarding the shot, but Mr. Anthony had neither stopped nor answered; on the contrary, he had broken into a run. The officer had considered this strange behavior, but, being at all times most respectful toward Americans, he had made no effort to detain him. Passing on, he had found the body of the dead man. A revolver was beside it. It was

shocking! It had quite upset the witness. He had blown his whistle, and seeing a light in the Governor's mansion close by had called there for assistance. Soon afterward another officer had arrived upon the scene.

When this amazing testimony was translated to Kirk he was astounded; but his indignation was as nothing to that which swept over him when a servant in the Alfarez household swore to having actually witnessed the murder.

This fellow declared that he had been troubled greatly with a toothache. Toward morning of the night in question, too restless for sleep, he had gone out upon the sea wall. Even now, his face was swollen, and he made a determined effort to show the court the particular tooth which had made him an unwilling beholder of the tragedy. Overcome by exhaustion, he had fallen asleep after a time, and he was awakened by the sounds of a quarrel. On opening his eyes, he saw two Americans, one of whom was Senor Cortlandt, and the other Kirk Anthony. Being utterly ignorant of their language, he had no means of knowing what was said, nor did he consider the altercation serious until the large man shot the Senor Cortlandt. Then, being terror−stricken at what he had beheld, he had run away, entirely forgetting his toothache, which, by the grace of God, was quite gone. That was all he knew of the matter. He recognized Anthony as the man who had done the shooting. He was troubled greatly with toothaches.

It all seemed like some grotesque, practical joke, and Kirk at first could not believe that the evidence of these witnesses could have weight. But he soon became convinced that this was no laughing matter. Since they had perjured themselves so readily, it was evident that some determined influence was back of them, and how far that influence might carry it was hard to tell. The reason for it was all very simple, of course, and yet he was at a loss how to combat it. Wade was called next and told the story of that damning incident at the supper−party, being corroborated by the others. Then there were several witnesses who swore to inconsequent things, such as waiters at the Hotel Central, and the doctor who had examined Cortlandt.

For once in his careless life the young man realized that he was face to face with something bigger and stronger than his own determination, and it daunted him. He began to see that he had underestimated these foreigners, for it seemed an easy matter to convict an innocent man in these Central American courts. He recalled certain ridiculous stories of Spanish justice which he had laughed at; he remembered Mrs. Cortlandt's vivid tale of an execution she had once beheld in the court−yard of Chiriqui prison; and suddenly he decided to cable for Darwin K. Anthony— the one man who was strong enough to save him.

When it came time for him to speak, he told a straight story about his own actions on that night, and he was corroborated by Allan; but he knew that their words had little weight against that other testimony. Of course, he was remanded for trial, and that night the newspapers of the city were crowded with columns of sensational reading−matter bearing upon the crime.

Anson, the lawyer, gave him a ray of encouragement as he left.

"Don't go too much on this hearing," he said. "I think we'll pull you out all right."

"You THINK! I dare say Ramon Alfarez can get a dozen men to perjure themselves as easily as he got those two."

"Exactly. But I have a little coup that I intend to spring at the right moment."

"For Heaven's sake, tell me what it is."

"I'm sorry, but I can't just yet. In the first place, one must handle these people exactly right or they explode."

"But give me an idea at least. I'm really interested in the outcome of this case, you know."

Anson smiled. "Of course you are, and I'll tell you as soon as I can, but not now."

"These Spiggoties would enjoy standing me up against a wall with my head in a rag—they'd make it a holiday and ring all the bells in town."

"I can't assure you that it isn't serious," Anson acknowledged, gravely, "for it is—any time an American goes to court in this country it is serious—but that doesn't mean that we'll lose."

"You may be a good lawyer," said Kirk, ruefully, "but you're a blamed poor comforter. I—I wish my dad was here; he'd fix it. He wouldn't let 'em convict me. He's great, my dad is. He can swear— like the devil." His voice caught, and his eyes were unusually bright as he turned away to hide his emotions. "I like him better than any man I've ever met, Anson. And you watch him come when he hears I'm in trouble."

He wrote a lengthy cablegram, which the lawyer, with a peculiar smile, agreed to despatch at once. He spent a sleepless night. In the morning a message came signed by Copley—Kirk's heart leaped at the familiar name—saying that Darwin K. Anthony had left Albany for the West on Sunday night, and could not be located

for a few days.

"He was never gone when I needed money," the son mused. "He'll be worried when he hears about this, and he has enough to worry him as it is. I'm mighty sorry, but—I simply must have him."

Anson brought in the day's papers, which alluded, as usual, to Cortlandt's death as a murder, and printed their customary sensational stories, even to a rehash of all that had occurred at the stag supper. This in particular made Kirk writhe, knowing as he did that it would reach the eyes of his newly made wife. He also wondered vaguely how Edith Cortlandt was bearing up under all this notoriety. The lawyer brought the further news that Allan was in captivity as an accessory to the crime, and that henceforth Kirk need expect but few visitors. Somebody—probably Ramon Alfarez—had induced the officials to treat their prisoner with special severity.

During the days which followed, Kirk suffered more than he chose to confess even to his attorney. In the first place, it was hard to be denied all knowledge of what was going on—Anson would tell him little, except that he was working every day—and, then, too, the long hours of solitude gnawed at his self−control. Runnels managed to see him once or twice, reporting that, so far as he could learn, Chiquita had disappeared. He took a message from Kirk to her, but brought back word that he could not deliver it. Kirk wondered if she could really believe those frightful half−complete newspaper accounts, or if she had been unable to withstand the combined weight of her whole family, and had given up. It was almost too much to hope that a girl reared as she had been could keep her mind unpoisoned, with all those lying tongues about her. And, besides, she had the Spanish ideas of morality, which would make the actions of which he was accused seem doubly shocking. The more he speculated upon the cause of her silence, the wilder grew his fancies, until it became a positive torture to think of her at all. Instead, his thoughts turned to Edith Cortlandt in a curiously uninterested way. Her attitude was a problem. Perhaps she would leave him to his fate. Reviewing the circumstances coldly, he could hardly blame her.

It was on Sunday, a week after his arrest, that she came to him. He was surprised to see the ravages that this short time had made in her, for she was pale and drawn and weary−looking, as if from sleeplessness. Strange to say, these marks of suffering did not detract from her appearance, but rather enhanced her poise and distinction. She was not even veiled. On the contrary, she had driven openly to the police barracks, and ordered her coachman to wait in the street outside, then demanded to be shown to Anthony's cell.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Mrs. Cortlandt," he said, as she extended her hand. "But do you think it was wise for you to come?"

She shrugged. "People can say no more than they have already said. My name is on every tongue, and a little more gossip can make matters no worse. I had to come. I just couldn't stay away. I wonder if you can realize what I have been through."

"It must have been terrible," he said, gently.

"Yes, I have paid. It seems to me that I have paid for everything I ever did. Those newspaper stories nearly killed me, but it wasn't that so much as the thought that you were suffering for my acts."

"I'm very sorry. You never thought for a moment that I did what they claim?"

"No, no! It has all been a mistake from the first. I was sure of that."

"You heard what those two men testified?"

"Bah! That is Ramon Alfarez—but he can do nothing."

"Nothing! I don't call a week in the Bastile 'nothing.' Why, he has perjured two witnesses already, and I dare say he'll have the whole native population swearing against me when the trial comes up."

"Never mind. I have had no time to do anything as yet. There were —so many things to be attended to." She shuddered and sank down upon the edge of his cot. "Stephen had a great many friends in various parts of the world; I have been swamped with cablegrams."

"If my dad were here he'd have me free in a jiffy; he can do anything."

"I don't think we'll need him," she said, in a way that comforted him somehow, though the feeling shamed him. She laid a soft hand upon his arm, and, looking up eagerly into his face, exclaimed: "You will forgive me for what I said that night at the hotel, won't you? I didn't really mean to injure you, Kirk, but I was half hysterical. I had suffered so these last few months that I was ready to do anything. I was torn by two great desires, one to remain what I am and have always been, and the other—well, the other was the stronger, or would have been if you had allowed it. I never dreamed there was a way out of my misery, a way so close at hand; but somehow even before General Alfarez' voice on the 'phone told me what had happened, I knew, and I—I felt—"

"I know you had a great deal to put up with," he said, "but for both our sakes I wish it had come in some other way."

"Oh, I don't care," she cried, recklessly. "The one thing I can grasp in all this turmoil, the one thing that rings in my ears every moment, is that I am free, FREE! That is all that matters to me. You showed your loyalty to Stephen more than once, and, though your scruples angered me, I honor you for them now. I can see, too, that you had no choice but to put me off even that night of the dance. But my chains are broken, and it is all different now."

"Your husband's death can make no difference with us, Mrs. Cortlandt," he said, gravely.

"We have talked openly before, and there is no need to do otherwise now. You mean by that that you don't care for me, but I know better. I believe there is a love so strong that it must find an answer. Although you may not care for me now as you care for— some one else—I KNOW that I can make you forget her and put me in her place. I know men, and I know you. I came here prepared to be honest—shameless, if you like. I am young, I have money, I have power; I work for the love of doing things, and you are learning to do the same. I can help you, oh, so much! We can win happiness together just as easily as we can win material success, and that is ours now for the asking. It dazzles me to think of it, Kirk. It is like a glimpse of paradise, and I can show it all to you." She was bending forward, her lips parted, the color gleaming in her cheeks, her whole face transformed by a passionate eagerness.

"Wait!" he said, harshly. "You force me to break my word. I don't want to tell you this, but—I am married."

She rose slowly, her eyes fixed in bewilderment upon his, her hand clutching at his sleeve.

"You—never told me that! It was some mad college prank, I suppose."

"No, no. I married Gertrudis Garavel that night at the Tivoli."

"Oh, that can't be. That was the night of the dance."

"It is quite true."

Mrs. Cortlandt stared about the squalid cell dully.

"Miss Garavel! Why didn't you tell me? Why isn't she here? Why does she leave you alone? No, no! You hardly know each other. Why, she's not old enough to know her own mind—"

"But I know my mind, and I love her."

Her white hands strained at each other as she steadied her shaking voice. "Love!" she cried. "You don't know what love means, nor does she. She CAN'T know, or she'd be here, she'd have this prison torn block from block."

"I suppose her father would not let her come," said Kirk, slowly, but Edith did not seem to hear him. The realization of her broken hopes was coming home to her poignantly.

"My happiness!" she exclaimed. "I have been unhappy so long! And I seemed to see it just within my reach. Oh, Kirk, she thinks you are guilty, she hasn't faith."

"You have no right to say that."

"See! I came to you when I was married and asked you to take me; I'll do the same with you now."

"You don't know what you're saying. You're hysterical, Mrs. Cortlandt. I love Gertrudis so deeply that there's no room in me for anything else, and never will be. Heaven only knows what they have made her believe about me, but I don't care; I'll upset this little plot of Alfarez's, and when she learns the truth she will come back again."

"This little plot!" Edith cried, in distraction. "And I suppose you wish me to give you back to her?"

They confronted each other a moment in silence.

"But I won't help her," she went on. "I'm not that sort. I'm a selfish woman. I've always been selfish because I've never had anybody to work for. But I have it in me to be generous."

"I'm sorry," he said. "You have suffered, I know. Don't trouble any more about me—please."

She stared at him defiantly, although her whole frame was shaking as if from an ague.

"Oh, I'd rather face the gallows as you face it than what is before me, and I'm not sure I could help you, after all. You are in Latin America now, remember, and your enemies are strong."

"I am Darwin K. Anthony's son," he protested. "He won't allow it."

"Bah! He is an American, and these are Spanish people. You have seen how they like us, and you have seen what Alfarez can do. He's rich, and he'll perjure more witnesses, he'll manipulate the court with his money. Yes, and I'd rather he succeeded than see you—No, no! What am I saying? L−let me go; let me get away from here!" She broke down, and went sobbing out into the corridor. The iron door clanged to behind her.

On the same afternoon, Mr. Clifford, accompanied by Anson, the lawyer, took the 3.20 train for Colon. As soon as he arrived, he called up Colonel Jolson, to request that the Commissioner's motor−car should, without fail, await him at ten o'clock sharp on the next morning, with an open track ahead of it. Strangely enough, the Colonel agreed very readily.

XXX. DARWIN K. ANTHONY

About noon on Monday, Edith Cortlandt received a caller. The name she read on the card her maid handed her gave her a start of surprise, and set her wits whirling in speculation.

"Show him into the drawing−room," she said, at length. "I'll be right down."

As she descended, a few moments later, she was greeted by a gigantic old man with a rumbling voice, who, instead of seating himself in the drawing−room as he had been requested, had flung open the carefully closed shutters to admit more light, then kicked aside whatever articles of furniture happened to be in his way. He was now pacing back and forth with the restlessness of a polar bear.

"How do you do, Mrs. Cortlandt?" he began, at sight of her, his big voice flooding the room. "I'm sorry to disturb you under the circumstances."

"You are Mr. Anthony?"

"Yes, madam. You'll pardon my intrusion. I knew your husband slightly, and I've heard about you. I extend my sympathy."

She bowed. "When did you arrive?"

"Just now; came across in one of those damned joy−wagons—fifty miles an hour. We hit a nigger on the way, but we didn't stop. I know everything, madam. What I didn't know before I landed, I learned on the way across the Isthmus, so don't let's waste time. Hell of a position for you to be in—I understand and all that— and I'm sorry for you. Now let's get down to business, for I must get back to New York."

It was impossible not to feel Darwin K. Anthony's force; it spoke in his every tone and action. It looked out from his harsh−lined features, and showed in his energetic movements. He was a great granite block of a man, powerful in physique, in mind, and in determination. He had Kirk's eyes, Mrs. Cortlandt noted, except that they were deeper set, more fierce and eager.

She was not used to being overridden, and his masterful air offended her.

"In what way may I be of service to you?" she inquired, coldly.

"I want my boy," he said, simply, and she began to see that underneath his cold and domineering exterior his heart was torn by a great distress.

"You know all the circumstances, of course?"

"I do. That's why I came straight to you. I know you're the keystone of the whole affair, so I didn't waste time with these other people. Kirk's a damned idiot, and always has been; he isn't worth the powder to blow him to—excuse me—I mean he's just a ne'er−do−well; but I suppose I'll have to do my duty by him."

"I understand that has always been your attitude."

"Exactly! I got sick of his performances and cut him off; couldn't stand for him any longer. I tried my best to make a man out of him, but he wouldn't have it, so we severed our connections absolutely. I just kicked him out. Sorry I didn't do it sooner."

"If you have cut him off, why do you care what becomes of him?"

Darwin K. Anthony's eyes dimmed, but his voice rose fiercely. "He's my boy, and I've a right to treat him any damned way I please, but nobody else is going to abuse him! These Spaniards can't do it! I'll teach them to lay hands on my—boy." He tore a handkerchief from his pocket and blew a blast into it. "I'll tear their little Republic to pieces," he shouted. "I'll buy the whole works and throw it away. I'll buy their President and their courts and their whole infernal population, and if they won't sell I've got enough men to take it. Hell's bells, madam, do you think these little black people can shoot MY son? I don't care what he's done, they've got to give him up. And he's going back with me. He's going home; I—I—want him."

"Why have you come to me?" she queried.

"Because you must know the truth, if anybody does, and I want your help." His voice softened suddenly, and he regarded her with a gentle kindness that was surprising. "I've heard all about you and Kirk. In fact, I've known what was going on all the time, for I've had a man on his track night and day. You may know him—Clifford? Well, he followed Kirk that night after the supper to your husband, but Anson didn't dare call him to the stand at the hearing for fear this Alfarez would perjure more of his black−and− tans." He ground his teeth in rage. "By

God! I'll get that Ramon, if it costs me a million—they can't stand for such things even here. But I want MORE proof; I want to snow him under absolutely, completely."

"So Clifford is your man?"

"Yes! I took him off my system and sent him down here as soon as I got Kirk's idiotic, impudent letter—" The old man began to sputter with indignation. "What d'you think he wrote me, Mrs. Cortlandt? He had the impudence to turn down a good job I offered him because 'his wife might not like our climate!' Imagine! And I had positively begged him to come back—on any terms. Of course, it gave me an awful scare, and I lost no time in learning if it was true. Thank God, he had sense enough not to do that!"

"Then you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That he is married."

"DAMNATION!" roared Anthony, furiously.

She nodded. "A Miss Garavel. They were married a—week ago." She broke down miserably and hid her face in her hands. He strode to her with a light of understanding in his eyes. Laying a great hand upon her drooping head, he exclaimed with wonderful softness:

"My dear Mrs. Cortlandt, I'm very sorry for you, indeed I am. How the boy ever let you go for any other woman I don't see, but he's always been a fool—that's why he never cared for me. Now, now, try to face it squarely—all good women are brave, and you're a good woman. We both love him, and I know we can save him if we pull together."

"Yes, yes!" She raised her drawn, white face eagerly to his. "It will only take a word, but I have been like a mad woman. I couldn't bear to give him up, and when I learned the truth I thought I could let him—suffer. But I couldn't. Oh, I couldn't, and I knew it all the time. I was distracted, that is all. You see I have no shame in telling you this, for he is the first and only man—"

"I know." He patted her in a way that said more than words.

"I couldn't have stood out much longer."

"Then you have proof?" His face was wild with eagerness.

"This. Take it quickly. I only found it last night. It had been mislaid in the confusion. I meant to give it up, I really did." With clumsy fingers she drew from the front of her dress an unsealed letter and handed it to him. "Stephen was not a bad man, you see, and he had no intention of wronging an innocent person."

Darwin K. Anthony's pallor matched hers as he read the sheet, then he exclaimed, weakly, "Thank God! Something told me to come straight to you. Something always tells me where to find the heart of things."

"Quick! You must lose no time," she exclaimed. "He is in prison, and the place is frightful. I will go with you to the Mayor. Ah, I'm very glad he will get his freedom from your hands. I was so weak. When this is done I shall go back North and try to live it out. But I love him very dearly, Mr. Anthony." Her lip trembled piteously. "And I could have done so much for him."

Grim−faced and scowling he re−read the letter in his hand during the moment it required for Edith to make ready. The injustice that had been done his blood roused every passion in him. He had himself well in hand, however, and he restrained his yearning to burst forcibly into the police barracks and take his boy to his heart. He determined there should be no possible slip—and he longed ferociously to meet Ramon Alfarez.

Kirk was considerably surprised that afternoon when a sergeant and two policemen came to his cell, signifying that he was to accompany them. He could not make out where they were taking him, and, despite their unusual politeness, they were dense to all inquiries. It was a bright, hot afternoon, and the city seemed very beautiful and desirous as he was driven through it; but the whole procedure filled him with uneasiness. He was sure that it had nothing to do with his trial, or Anson would have posted him, and he began to fear that it might concern his marriage. Perhaps Chiquita was ill, dying, or perhaps they were trying to annul the bond. The smiling little officer only shook his head, shrugged, and chattered unintelligibly at his questions.

The coach drew up at last before a large, white building, and he was told to descend. Up a flight of stairs he was escorted, his pulses quickening with apprehension, down a long corridor, and into a large room, where he saw Runnels, Colonel Jolson, Anson, Clifford, a dozen or more Panamanian officials, and—he stopped in his tracks as his eyes fell upon a huge, white−crowned figure that came to meet him. His heart leaped wildly, a great drumming set up in his ears, something gripped his throat with agonizing pressure and robbed him of speech.

A certain harsh yet tender voice pronounced his name. He felt his hands crushed in his father's palms, found the old man's arm about his shoulders, and saw the deep−set, steel−blue eyes he loved so well wet and shiny. Then, for once and for all time, he realized that in the whole wide world there was but one man who really mattered, one man for whom he honestly cared. A sudden sense of security swept over him, banishing all his fears. The room with its smiling faces became blurred and distant; a thousand words of endearment sprang to his lips. What he really said was:

"Hello!" And even that he pronounced as shyly as a girl.

"My kid!" the old man said, shakingly. "H−how have they treated you, Buster?" It was a nickname he had given his son when he was a sturdy, round−faced urchin of eight, and which he had laid away regretfully in lavender, so to speak, when the boy grew to manhood.

"You came, didn't you?" Kirk said, in a voice not at all like his own. "I knew you'd come."

"Of course I came, the instant Clifford cabled me that these idiots had arrested you. By God! They'll sweat for this. How are you anyhow, Kirk? Dammit, you need a shave! Wouldn't they give you a razor? Hey! Clifford, Colonel Jolson, come here! These scoundrels wouldn't give him a shave." Darwin K. Anthony's eyes began to blaze at this indignity, and he rumbled on savagely: "Oh, I'll smash this dinky government—try to convict my kid, eh? I suppose you're hungry, too; well, so'm I. We'll be out of here in a minute, then you show me the best place in town and we'll have a decent meal, just we two, the way we used to. I'll pay the bill. God Almighty! I've missed you, Buster."

"Wait, dad." Kirk was smiling, but his heart ached at his father's emotion. "I'm a jail−bird, you know. They think I—killed a fellow. But I don't care much what they think now."

"That's all over," Clifford broke in. "We've squared that, and you'll be discharged in ten minutes."

"Honest?"

"Certainly," said the old gentleman. "Cortlandt shot himself. Anybody but a blithering Spanish ass would have known it at the start. We have a letter he wrote to his wife an hour before he did it. She just found it and turned it over. She left here a moment ago, by−the−way, all broken up. She's a great woman, Kirk. That's not all, either. Clifford followed you that night, and knows you didn't go near Cortlandt. Oh, you should have seen 'em jump when we flashed it on 'em all at once and they learned who I was!"

"But those men who swore they saw me?"

"Bah! We've got that little Dago with the mustache, and both his witnesses. If they don't send him up, I'll run in a shipload of my brakemen, and we'll push this Isthmus overboard and him with it."

"I knew you could fix things."

"Fix 'em! Fix 'em! That's EASY! Say, how have you been getting along, anyhow?"

"Great!"

"And you married one of these Panamanicures, eh?" The father scowled. "Lord! I can trust you to make a fool of yourself."

"Say, dad. She's only—so big." Anthony Junior indicated his wife's stature, smiling rapturously.

"Dwarf, eh?"

"Oh no!"

"Love her?"

"DO I? It's fierce."

"Humph! You'll have to get over it. I'll pay your debts and take care of you, but I can't stand a mulatto around me."

"There aren't any debts, and she's not a mulatto. She's a—dream."

"They're waiting, Mr. Anthony," Clifford made bold to say. "I think we'd better get this over with."

Kirk paid little attention to the formalities of the next few minutes. He was too busy with thoughts of his amazing good− fortune, his mind was too dazzled by the joy of freedom. Allan appeared from somewhere and clung to him in an ecstasy of delight. Colonel Jolson, Runnels, Anson, even the Panamanian officials shook hands with him. He accepted their congratulations mechanically, meanwhile keeping very close to his father's side.

Some time later he found himself out in the open sunlight a free man once more, with Darwin K. Anthony and Runnels on either side of him. But before he had gone a block, he halted suddenly, saying:

"Williams! I'd forgotten him and his warrant."

"He's fixed," Runnels explained. "While your father and Mrs. Cortlandt and Colonel Jolson were getting you out of jail, Clifford and I told him the truth. He's rather a decent fellow. They have caught the real Jefferson Locke, or whatever his name is."

"No!"

"Yes; a week ago. He landed in Boston; couldn't stay away from his own country any longer. Williams hadn't heard of it."

"What has become of Higgins?" Kirk inquired of his father.

Anthony Senior exploded:

"Oh, he's back scorching up the Tenderloin as usual, but you'll have to cut him out, or I'll leave you here. That's final, understand?"

"I intend to stay here, anyhow."

"Huh?" The old man turned with a start. "I'm damned if you do." Then, savagely: "What do you suppose I came down here for? I'm lonesome. I want you to come home."

Kirk smiled craftily and looked at Runnels. "Well, what can you offer? I'm doing pretty well as it is, and I can't afford to lay off."

His father in turn appealed to the Acting Superintendent. "See! It's nothing less than blackmail. Is he any good, Mr. Runnels?"

"If there weren't so much politics in this job, he'd be Master of Transportation of the P. R. R. That's doing pretty well, isn't it? We're both going to quit and look for new work."

"Do you drink, Kirk?"

"I haven't even had an alcohol rub since I left New York. But, dad, if you place me, you'll have to take care of Runnels, too. He knows more about railroads than—you do."

Mr. Anthony grunted a trifle sceptically at this and murmured: "He must be a bright young man. I suppose what he doesn't know, you do. Well, how would you both like to come North and give me some lessons?"

"Do you mean it?" they cried in chorus.

"I do."

"Oh, there's Allan, too, he'll have to go."

"Any cats and dogs you'd like to have drawing salary from me? Now let's go somewhere and eat. I haven't tasted anything to speak of since Clifford's message came."

"If you don't mind, I—I'd like to stop at the Garavels' for a minute," Kirk said, longingly, and his father scowled.

"I'd forgotten this—wife of yours."

"She's not there," Runnels hastened to say. "I've tried to find her, but I was told she was out at the country place."

"Then I think I'd rather drive out there than eat. Won't you go with me, dad?"

"Well—yes! I want to see this banker fellow, and—I'm not so damned hungry, after all. We'll settle this thing right now."

The afternoon sun was still an hour high when Kirk Anthony came down the hill from the Garavels' home and crossed the meadow toward the forest glade he knew so well. The grateful coolness of evening was stealing downward, and Nature was roused from her midday lethargy. It was the vibrant, active hour when odors are freshest and spirits rise. The forest was noisy with the cry of birds, and flocks of shrill−voiced paroquets raised an uproar in the tallest trees. The dense canopy of green overhead was alive with fluttering wings; the groves echoed to the cries of all the loud−voiced thicket denizens. The pastured cattle, which had sauntered forth from shaded nooks, ceased their grazing to stare with gentle curiosity at the hurrying figure. Of course they recognized a lover speeding to his tryst, and gave him passage, shaking their heads at one another and wagging their ears in knowing fashion.

He faltered a bit despite his haste, for this nook had grown sacred to him, and even yet he felt that it was haunted. The laughter of the waterfall helped to drown the sound of his approach, but he surprised no dancing wood−sprites. Instead, he saw what filled his heart with a greater gladness than he had ever known.

Chiquita was there, huddled upon the seat where they had rested together, one foot curled beneath her like a child, her head bowed down disconsolately. From one brown hand, now drooping listlessly, a few wild flowers

had scattered, and her slim figure was clad once more in the stiff, coarse denim dress of blue. Her other hand was toying with her beads mechanically, as if the fingers had learned their task from long practice. Her dusky eyes were fast upon the lights that wavered in the pool.

As if to prove that the spot was really peopled by kind spirits, a gentle voice seemed to whisper the news to her, and she turned to find him smiling at her. She rose and met him with her hands outstretched, her face transfigured.

After a time she leaned backward in his arms, and said, gravely: "You see! When one says many, many prayers, the good saints always answer. The padre told me that I should never cease until you came, but I grew very tired, senor."

"And you never doubted me?"

"Oh no!"

"I'm free, you know."

"Of course! What else were my prayers for? Had my father allowed, I would have gone to your prison, but he forbade it, so I had no choice. But every hour I prayed that he might give me leave, and I think his heart was yielding."

"I'm sure of that," he told her, "for I have just come from him."

It was some time later, when the sun was dipping, that voices sounded outside the wall of verdure, and Kirk heard Andres Garavel saying:

"Of a certainty I shall try that experiment, senor, for the ticks in this country are a pest to cattle. A little to the right, and you will find the path—So!"

An instant later the two white−haired men appeared.

"Hello! There you are, eh?" Darwin K. Anthony exclaimed, gruffly. "Where's that girl?" He paused and let his hostile eyes rest upon Gertrudis.

She saw a great, forbidding giant of a man scowling down at her with eyes like Kirk's, and she came forward timidly, holding out her hands. She was smiling up at him faintly.

"You are Keerk's father, yes? You are the Senor Antonio."

Mr. Anthony uttered a curious, choking exclamation, and gathered her gently in his arms. When he looked up, his eyes were wet and his deep−lined face was working.

"I couldn't wait any longer," he apologized humbly to his son. "I had to come and see her."

"Ah, then I hope you will like me," she said in her grave, quaint way.

"Your father has told me everything"—Garavel laid a hand upon his new son's shoulder—"and we have become good friends already. I fear I owe you a great apology, my boy; but if I consent that you take my little girl away to your country, will that be reparation?"

"Then you WILL let her go with us?" Kirk cried, happily.

"If she doesn't go, I'll stay," Anthony Senior rumbled. "I—I don't see how you ever did it, you're such a blamed fool. Now let's go back to the house, it's sundown."

"We'll be along directly," his son assented.

"There are chills in the evening air," Mr. Garavel protested.

"I'm sorry, but we were waiting for the fairies. They were almost in sight when you frightened them away."

Gertrudis nodded. "It is quite true, Senor Antonio. We heard them all about, everywhere." She placed her little hand in Kirk's, then checked her father's remonstrance, saying:

"Oh, it is quite proper for us to walk home together, even in the dark; we are married now, you know."

"Come on, Garavel," exclaimed Darwin K. Anthony. "You understand how it is." Together they went out through the fragrant path a little way, then old man Anthony paused and called back to his son, wistfully: "But, I say, Kirk, don't stay too long; we're lonesome."

THE END