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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRUISE OF THE THETIS: A TALE OF THE CUBAN INSURRECTION ***

Harry Collingwood

"The Cruise of the Thetis"

Chapter One.

A friend—and a mysterious stranger.

"Hillo, Singleton, old chap, how are you?" exclaimed a young fellow of about eighteen years of age, as he laid his hand upon the shoulder of a lad about his own age, who, on a certain fine July day in the year of grace 1894, was standing gazing into the window of a shop in Piccadilly.

The speaker was a somewhat slightly-built youth, rather tall and slim, by no means ill-looking, of sallow complexion and a cast of features that betrayed his foreign origin, although his English was faultless. The young man whom he had addressed was, on the other hand, a typical Englishman, tall, broad, with "athlete" written large all over him; fair of skin, with a thick crop of close-cut, ruddy-golden locks that curled crisply on his well-shaped head, and a pair of clear, grey-blue eyes that had a trick of seeming to look right into the very soul of anyone with whom their owner happened to engage in conversation. Just now, however, there was a somewhat languid look in those same eyes that, coupled with an extreme pallor of complexion and gauntness of frame, seemed to tell a tale of ill health. The singularly handsome face, however, lighted up with an expression of delighted surprise as its owner turned sharply round and answered heartily:

"Why, Carlos, my dear old chap, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure! We were talking about you only last night—Letchmere, Woolaston, Poltimore, and I, all old Alleynians who had foregathered to dine at the Holborn. Where in the world have you sprung from?"

"Plymouth last, where I arrived yesterday, *en route* to London from Cuba," was the answer. "And you are the second old Alleynian whom I have already met. Lancaster—you remember him, of course—came up in the same compartment with me all the way. He is an engineer now in the dockyard at Devonport, and was on his way to join his people, who are off to Switzerland, I think he said."

"Yes, of course I remember him," was the answer, "but I have not seen him since we all left Dulwich together. And what are you doing over here, now—if it is not an indiscreet question to ask; and how long do you propose to stay?"

The sallow-complexioned, foreign-looking youth glanced keenly about him before replying, looked at his watch, and then remarked:

"Close upon half-past one—lunch-time; and this London air of yours has given me a most voracious appetite. Suppose we go in somewhere and get some lunch, to start with; afterwards we can take a stroll in the Park, and have a yarn together—that is to say, if you are not otherwise engaged."

"Right you are, my boy; that will suit me admirably, for I have no other engagement, and, truth to tell, was feeling somewhat at a loss as to how to dispose of myself for the next hour or two. Here you are, let us go into Prince's," answered Singleton. The two young men entered the restaurant, found a table, called a waiter, and ordered lunch; and while they are taking the meal the opportunity may be seized to make the reader somewhat better acquainted with them.

There is not much that need be said by way of introduction to either of them. Carlos Montijo was the only son of Don Hermoso Montijo, a native of Cuba, and the most extensive and wealthy tobacco planter in the Vuelta de Abajo district of that island. He was also intensely patriotic, and was very strongly suspected by the Spanish rulers of Cuba of regarding with something more than mere passive sympathy the efforts that had been made by the Cubans from time to time, ever since '68, to throw off the Spanish yoke. He was a great admirer of England, English institutions, and the English form of government, which, despite all its imperfections, he considered to be the most admirable

form of government in existence. It was this predilection for things English that had induced him to send his son Carlos over to England, some nine years prior to the date of the opening of this story, to be educated at Dulwich, first of all in the preparatory school and afterwards in the College. And it was during the latter period that Carlos Montijo became the especial chum of Jack Singleton, a lad of the same age as himself, and the only son of Edward Singleton, the senior partner in the eminent Tyneside firm of Singleton, Murdock, and Company, shipbuilders and engineers. The two lads had left Dulwich at the same time, Carlos to return to Cuba to master the mysteries of tobacco-growing, and Singleton to learn all that was to be learnt of shipbuilding and engineering in his father's establishment. A year ago, however, Singleton senior had died, leaving his only son without a near relation in the world—Jack's mother having died during his infancy: and since then Jack, as the dominant partner in the firm, had been allowed to do pretty much as he pleased. Not that he took an unwise advantage of this freedom—very far from it: he clearly realised that, his father being dead, there was now a more stringent necessity than ever for him to become master of every detail of the business; and, far from taking things easy, he had been working so hard that of late his health had shown signs of giving way, and at the moment when we make his acquaintance he was in London for the purpose of consulting a specialist.

During the progress of luncheon there had been, as was to be expected, a brisk crossfire of question and answer between the two young men, in the course of which Montijo had learned, among other things, that his friend Jack had been ordered by the specialist to leave business very severely alone for some time to come, and, if possible, to treat himself to at least six months' complete change of air, scene, and occupation.

"It fortunately so happens," said Jack, "that my position in the firm will enable me to do this very well, since Murdock, the other partner, is, and has been since my father's death, the actual manager of the business; and as he has been with us for nearly thirty years he knows all that there is to know about it, and needs no assistance from me. Also, I have at last completed the submarine which has been my pet project for almost as long as I can remember, and now all that I need is the opportunity to try her: indeed, but for Oxley's strict injunctions to me to cut business altogether, I should certainly spend my holiday in putting the boat to a complete series of very much more thorough and exhaustive tests than have thus far been possible. As it is, I really am at an almost complete loss how to spend my six months' holiday."

"Do you mean to say that you have no plans whatever?" demanded Montijo, as he and his friend rose from the table to leave the restaurant.

"None but those of the most vague and hazy description possible," answered Singleton. "Oxley's orders are 'change of scene, no work, and a life in the open air'; I am therefore endeavouring to weigh the respective merits of a cruise in my old tub the *Lalage*, and big-game shooting somewhere in Central Africa. But neither of them seems to appeal to me very strongly; the cutter is old and slow, while as for the shooting project, I really don't seem to have the necessary energy for such an undertaking, in the present state of my health."

"Look here, Jack," observed Montijo eagerly, as he slid his hand within his friend's arm and the pair wheeled westward toward Hyde Park, "I believe I have the very scheme to suit you, and I will expound it to you presently, when we get into the Park and can talk freely without the risk of being overheard. Meanwhile, what was it that you were saying just now about a submarine? I remember, of course, that you were always thinking and talking about submarines while we were at Dulwich, and also that you once made a model which you tested in the pond, and which dived so effectually that, unless you subsequently recovered her, she must be at the bottom of the pond still."

"Ay," answered Jack with a laugh; "I remember that ill-fated model. No, I never recovered her, but she nevertheless served her purpose; for her mishap gave me my first really useful idea in connection with the design of a submarine boat. And at last I have completed a working model which thus far has answered exceedingly well. She is only a small affair, you know, five feet in diameter by twenty-five feet long, but she is big enough to accommodate two men—or even three, at a pinch. I have been as deep as ten fathoms in her, and have no doubt she could descend to twice that depth; while she has an underwater speed of twenty knots, which she can maintain for five hours."

"By Jove, that's splendid—very much better than anything that anyone else has done, thus far!" exclaimed Montijo admiringly. "You ought to make your fortune with a boat of that sort. And you are pining for an opportunity to subject her to a thoroughly practical test? Well, my scheme, which I will explain in full when we get into the Park, will enable you to do that."

"Is that so?" commented Jack. "Then that alone would very strongly predispose me in favour of it. But why make such a secret of it, old chap? Is it of such a character that a passer-by, catching a few words of it, would be likely to hand us over to the nearest policeman as a couple of conspirators?"

"Well, no; it is scarcely so bad as that," answered Montijo, laughing: "but it is of such a nature that I would prefer not to speak of it, if you don't mind, until we are somewhere in the Park where we can converse freely without the fear of being overheard. You see, the Pater and I are pretty well-known to—and not too well liked by—the Spanish authorities in Cuba, and it is by no means certain that they may not think it quite worth their while to have us watched over here; therefore—"

"Yes, of course, I understand," returned Jack; "therefore for the present 'mum's the word', eh?"

Montijo nodded, and the two lads strode along, conversing upon various topics, until they reached Hyde Park Corner, and swung in through the Park gates, and so on to the grass.

"Ah, now at last I can speak freely!" remarked Montijo with a sigh of relief. "First of all, Singleton," he continued, "you must understand that what I am about to say will be spoken in the strictest confidence; and, whether you should agree to my proposal or not, I must ask you to pledge your honour as a gentleman that you will not repeat a single word of what I say to anyone—anyone, mind you—without first obtaining my consent, or that of my Pater."

"All right, Carlos, my boy," answered Singleton, cheerily; "I promise and vow all that you ask. There is nobody on the face of this earth of ours who can keep a secret better than I can, as you ought to know by this time."

"Yes, I do know it, perfectly well," agreed Montijo. "Well," he continued, "the fact is that the Pater and I have at last begun to interest ourselves actively in Cuban politics. We Cubans, as you perhaps know, have been trying, ever since '68, to induce the Spaniards to govern us mildly and justly, but thus far all our efforts have been fruitless: we are still being ground down and tyrannised over until the lives of many of us have become a burden; neither the property, the liberty, nor the life of any Cuban is safe to-day, unless he is well-known to be a supporter of the Spanish Government. After more than a quarter of a century of patient but ineffectual effort, therefore, it has been determined to take up arms, strike a blow for liberty, and never rest until Cuba is free from the hated Spanish yoke.

"It is in connection with this movement that the Pater and I are now in England. It is now nearly a year since Señor Marti—the man who above all others has been conspicuous in his efforts on behalf of Cuba—got hold of the Pater and succeeded in convincing him that it is the duty of every Cuban to do his utmost to free his country from the grasp of the tyrant; and one of the first-fruits of this was the giving of an order by the Pater—through a friend—for the construction of a fast steam-yacht, to be used as may be required in the service of the country, but primarily for the purpose of smuggling arms, ammunition, and necessaries of all kinds into the island. Now, by a singular coincidence, this friend and agent of the Pater chose your firm as that which should build the yacht; and now we, having been advised that she is ready for delivery—"

"What!" exclaimed Singleton, "you surely don't mean to say that Number 78 is your boat?"

"Yes," answered Montijo quietly; "that is the number by which she is at present known, I believe."

"Then, Carlos, my dear boy, accept my most hearty congratulations!" exclaimed Singleton. "Our naval constructor has let himself go, and fairly outdone himself over that craft. It was a difficult task that you gave him to do when you asked for a boat of not less than three hundred tons on eight feet draught of water, and with a sea speed of twenty-two knots; but he has done it, and the result is that you have, in Number 78, the prettiest little boat that ever swam. Why, man, she has already done twenty-four knots over the measured mile, on her full draught of water, and in a fairly heavy sea; and she is the very sweetest sea boat that it is possible to imagine. Of course we could not have done it had we not boldly adopted the new-fashioned turbine principle for her engines; but they work to perfection, and even when she is running at full speed one can scarcely feel a tremor in her."

"I am delighted to receive so excellent an account of her," answered Montijo, "and so will the Pater be when I tell him—or, rather, when you tell him; for, Singleton, I want you to promise that you will dine with us to-night, and make the Pater's acquaintance. He is the very dearest old chap that you ever met—your own father, of course, excepted—and he will be enchanted to make your acquaintance. He already knows you well enough by name to speak of you as 'Jack'."

"I will do so with pleasure," answered Singleton heartily. "I have no other engagement, and after one has been to a theatre or a concert every night for a week—as I have—one begins to wish for a change. And while I don't wish to flatter you, Carlos, my boy, if your father is anything like you he is a jolly good sort, and I shall be glad to know him. But we have run somewhat off the track, haven't we? I understood that you have some sort of proposal to make."

"Yes," answered Montijo, "I have. Let me see—what were we talking about? Oh, yes, the yacht! Well, now that she is built, we are in something of a difficulty concerning her—a difficulty that did not suggest itself to any of us until quite recently. That difficulty is the difficulty of ownership. She has been built for the service of Cuba, but somebody must be her acknowledged owner; and if she is admitted to be the property of the Pater, of Marti, or, in fact, of any Cuban, she will at once become an object of suspicion to the Spanish Government, and her movements will be so jealously watched that it will become difficult, almost to the verge of impossibility, for her to render any of those services for which she is specially intended. You see that, Jack, don't you?"

"Certainly," answered Singleton, "that is obvious to the meanest intellect, as somebody once remarked. But how do you propose to get over the difficulty?"

"There is only one way that the Pater and I can see out of it," answered Montijo, "and that is to get somebody who is not likely to incur Spanish suspicion to accept the nominal ownership of the yacht, under the pretence of using her simply for his own pleasure."

"Phew!" whistled Singleton. "That may be all right for the other fellow, but how will it be for you? For that scheme to work satisfactorily you must not only find a man who will throw himself heart and soul into your cause, but also one whose honesty is proof against the temptation to appropriate to himself a yacht which will cost not far short of forty thousand pounds. For you must remember that unless the yacht's papers are absolutely in order, and her apparent ownership unimpeachable, it will be no good at all; she must be, so far at least as all documentary evidence goes, the indisputable property of the supposititious man of whom we have been speaking; and, that being the case, there will be nothing but his own inherent honesty to prevent him from taking absolute possession of her and doing exactly as he pleases with her, even to selling her, should he be so minded. Now, where are you going to find a man whom you can trust to that extent?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Montijo; "at least, I didn't until I met you, Jack. But if you are willing to be the man —"

"Oh, nonsense, my dear fellow," interrupted Jack, "that won't do at all, you know!"

"Why not?" asked Montijo. "Is it because you don't care to interfere in Cuban affairs? I thought that perhaps, as you are obliged to take a longish holiday, with change of scene and interests, an outdoor life, and so on, you would rather enjoy the excitement—"

"Enjoy it?" echoed Singleton. "My dear fellow, 'enjoy' is not the word, I should simply revel in it; all the more because my sympathies are wholly with the Cubans, while I—or rather my firm, have an old grudge against the Spaniards, who once played us a very dirty trick, of which, however, I need say nothing just now. No, it is not that; it is—"

"Well, what is it?" demanded Montijo, seeing that Jack paused hesitatingly.

"So near as I can put it," answered Jack, "it is this. Your father doesn't know me from Adam; and you only know as much as you learned of me during the time that we were together at Dulwich. How then can you possibly tell that I should behave on the square with you? How can you tell that, after having been put into legal possession of the yacht, I should not order you and your father ashore and forbid you both to ever set foot upon her decks again?"

Montijo laughed joyously. "Never mind how I know it, Jack," he answered. "I do know it, and that is enough. And if that is not a sufficiently convincing argument for you, here is another. You will admit that, in order to avoid the difficulty which I have pointed out, we must trust somebody, mustn't we? Very well. Now I say that there is no man in all the world whom I would so implicitly trust as yourself; therefore I ask you, as a very great favour, to come into this affair with us. It will just nicely fill up your six months' holiday—for the whole affair will be over in six months, or less—and give you such a jolly, exciting time as you may never again meet with during the rest of your life. Now, what do you say to that?"

"I say that your Pater must be consulted before the matter is allowed to go any further," answered Jack. "You can mention it to him between now and to-night, if you like, and if the idea is agreeable to him we can discuss it after dinner. And that reminds me that you have not yet mentioned the place or the hour of meeting."

"We are staying at the Cecil, and we dine at seven sharp," answered Montijo. "But don't go yet, old chap, unless I am boring you. Am I?"

"Do you remember my once punching your head at Dulwich for some trifling misdemeanour?" asked Jack laughingly, as he linked his arm in that of Montijo. "Very well, then. If you talk like that you will compel me to do it again. Do you know, Carlos, this scheme of yours is rapidly exercising a subtle and singularly powerful fascination over me? and even if your father should hesitate to entrust his boat to me, I feel very like asking him to let me take a hand in the game, just for the fun of the thing. And what a splendid opportunity it would afford for testing the powers of my submarine! Oh, by Jove, I think I must go, one way or another!"

The two young men wandered about the Park for nearly an hour longer, discussing the matter eagerly, and even going so far as to make certain tentative plans; and then they separated and went their respective ways, with the understanding that they were to meet again at the Cecil.

Jack was putting up at Morley's Hotel, in Trafalgar Square, and his nearest way back to it was, of course, down Piccadilly; but as he passed out through the Park gate he suddenly bethought himself of certain purchases that he wished to make at the Army and Navy Stores, and he accordingly crossed the road and entered the Green Park, with the intention of passing through it and Saint James's Park, and so into Victoria Street by way of Queen Anne's Gate and the side streets leading therefrom. He had got about halfway across Green Park when he became aware of quick footsteps approaching him from behind, and the next moment he was overtaken and accosted by a rather handsome man, irreproachably attired in frock-coat, glossy top-hat, and other garments to match. The stranger was evidently a foreigner—perhaps a Spaniard, Jack thought, although he spoke English with scarcely a trace of accent. Raising his hat, he said:

"Pardon me, sir, but may I venture to enquire whether the gentleman from whom you parted a few minutes ago happens to be named Montijo?"

"Certainly," answered Jack; "there can be no possible objection to your making such an enquiry, somewhat peculiar though it is. But whether I answer it or not must depend upon the reason which you may assign for asking the question. It is not usual, here in England, for total strangers to ask such personal questions as yours without being prepared to explain why they are asked."

"Precisely!" assented the stranger suavely. "My reason for asking is that I am particularly anxious to see Señor Montijo on very important business of a strictly private nature, and should your friend happen to be the gentleman in question I was about to ask if you would have the very great goodness to oblige me with his present address."

"I see," said Jack. "What caused you to think that my friend might possibly be the individual you are so anxious to meet?"

"Simply a strong general resemblance, nothing more," answered the stranger.

"Then, my dear sir," said Jack, "since you saw my friend—for otherwise you could not have observed his strong general resemblance to the person whom you are so anxious to meet—will you permit me to suggest that obviously the proper thing for you to have done was to accost him when the opportunity presented itself to you, instead of following me. Before I answer your question I am afraid I must ask you to favour me with your card, as a guarantee of your *bona fides*, you know."

"Certainly," answered the stranger unhesitatingly, as he felt in the breast pocket of his coat for his card-case. His search, however, proved ineffectual, or at least no card-case was produced; and presently, with an air of great vexation, he exclaimed:

"Alas! sir, I regret to say that I appear to have lost or mislaid my card-case, for I certainly have not it with me. My name, however, is—Mackintosh," with just the slightest perceptible hesitation.

"Mackintosh!" exclaimed Jack with enthusiasm; "surely not one of the Mackintoshes of Inveraray?"

"Certainly, my dear sir," answered the stranger effusively. "You have no doubt heard of us, and know us to be eminently respectable?"

"Never heard of you before," answered Jack, with a chuckle. "Good-morning, Mr Mackintosh!" And with a somewhat ironical bow he left the stranger gaping with astonishment.

"Now, what is the meaning of this, and what does Mr—Mackintosh—of Inveraray—want with Carlos, I wonder?" mused the young man, as he strode off across the Park. He considered the matter carefully for a few minutes, and presently snapped his fingers as he felt that he had solved the puzzle.

"I don't believe he is in the least anxious to obtain Montijo's address," he mused, "otherwise he would have followed Carlos—not me! But I suspect that he has been quietly dogging Carlos, with a view to discovering what friends he and his father make here in England; and, having seen Carlos and me together for some hours to-day, he was desirous of obtaining an opportunity to become acquainted with my features and general appearance. Shouldn't wonder if he follows me up and tries to discover where I live—yes, there the beggar is, obviously following me! Very well, I have no objection; on the contrary, the task of dodging him will add a new zest to life. And I'll give him a good run for his money!"

And therewith Jack, who had thus far been sauntering very quietly along, suddenly stepped out at his smartest pace, and was greatly amused to observe the anxiety which the stranger evinced to keep up with him. Out through the gate by the corner of Stafford House grounds strode Jack, across the Mall, through the gate into Saint James's Park, and along the path leading to the bridge, where he stopped, ostensibly to watch some children feeding the ducks, but really to see what the stranger would do. Then on again the moment that the latter also stopped, on past the drinking fountain and through the gate, across Birdcage Walk, and so into Queen Anne's Gate, a little way along York Street, then to the left and through into Victoria Street, across the road, and into the main entrance of the Army and Navy Stores. As he ran up the steps he glanced over his shoulder and saw his pursuer frantically striving to dodge between a 'bus and a hansom cab and still to keep his eyes on Jack, who passed in through the heavy swing doors, through the grocery department, sharp round to the right through the accountant's office into the perfumery department, and so out into Victoria Street again, making sure, as he passed out, that he had baffled his pursuer. Turning to the left, Jack then walked a little way down the street towards Victoria Station until he saw a Camden Town 'bus coming up, when he quietly crossed the road, boarded the 'bus, and ten minutes later stepped off it again as it pulled up at its stopping-place at the corner of Trafalgar Square. Jack now looked carefully round once more, to make quite sure that he had thrown "Mr Mackintosh" off the scent, satisfied himself that the individual in question was nowhere in sight, and entered his hotel.

Chapter Two.

Lieutenant Milsom, R.N.

The evening was fine, and the distance not far from Morley's to the Cecil; Jack therefore did not trouble to take a cab, but, slipping on a light dust-coat over his evening dress, set out to walk down the Strand on his way to dine with his friend. As he went his thoughts were dwelling upon the incident of his afternoon encounter with the mysterious "Mr Mackintosh, of Inveraray"; and he decided that he would let Carlos and his father know that someone appeared to be taking rather a marked interest in them and their movements. A walk of some ten minutes' duration sufficed to take him to his destination; and as he turned in at the arcade which gives access to the hotel from the Strand, whom should he see but the mysterious stranger, apparently intently studying the steamship advertisements displayed in one of the windows of the arcade, but in reality keeping a sharp eye upon the hotel entrances.

"Ah!" thought Jack; "watching, are you? All right; I'll see if I can't give you a bit of a scare, my friend!" And, so thinking, the young giant walked straight up to the stranger, and, gripping him firmly by the arm, exclaimed:

"Hillo, Mackintosh, waiting for Mr Montijo, eh? Is this where he is stopping? Because, if so, we may as well go in together, and see if he is at home. The sight of you reminds me that I rather want to see him myself. Come along, old chap!" And therewith Jack, still retaining his grip upon the stranger's arm, swung him round and made as though he would drag him along to the hotel.

"Carrajo! How dare you, sir!" exclaimed the stranger, vainly striving to wrench himself free from Jack's grasp. "Release me, sir; release me instantly, you young cub, or I will call a policeman!"

"What!" exclaimed Jack, in affected surprise; "don't you wish to see your friend Montijo? Very well; run along, then. But take notice of what I say, Mr Mackintosh; if I find you hanging about here again I will call a policeman and give you in charge as a suspicious character. Now, be off with you, and do not let me see you again."

And, swinging him round, Jack thrust him away with such force that it was with difficulty the man avoided falling headlong into the carriage-way. Then, calmly passing into the hotel, Singleton enquired for Señor Montijo, and was ushered to that gentleman's private suite of rooms by an obsequious waiter.

He found both father and son waiting for him in a very pretty little drawing-room, and, Carlos having duly introduced his friend, the three stood chatting together upon the various current topics of the day until dinner was announced, when they filed into a small dining-room adjoining. Here also the conversation was of a strictly general character, so long, at least, as the waiters were about; but at length the latter withdrew, and the two young men, at Señor Montijo's request, drew up their chairs closer to his.

Don Hermoso Montijo was a man in the very prime of life, being in his forty-third year; and, fortune having been kind to him from the first, while sickness of every description had carefully avoided him, he looked even younger than his years. He was a tall, powerful, and strikingly handsome man, of very dark complexion, with black hair, beard, and moustache, and dark eyes that sparkled with good humour and vivacity; and his every movement and gesture were characterised by the stately dignity of the true old Spanish hidalgo. He had spoken but little during dinner, his English being far from perfect; moreover, although he had paid the most elaborately courteous attention to what Jack said, his thoughts had seemed to be far away. Now, however, he turned to his guest and said, with an air of apology:

“Señor Singleton, I must pray you to me pardon if I have silent been during—the—meal—of dinner, but I have not much of English, as you have doubtless noticed. Have you the Spanish?”

Jack laughed as he replied in that language: “What I have, Señor, I owe entirely to Carlos here. He may perhaps have told you that we two used to amuse ourselves by teaching each other our respective tongues. But I am afraid I was rather a dull scholar; and if my Spanish is only half as good as Carlos’s English I shall be more than satisfied.”

“I am afraid I am unable to judge the quality of Carlos’s English,” answered Don Hermoso, “but I beg to assure you, Señor, that your Spanish is excellent; far better, indeed, than that spoken by many of my own countrymen. If it be not too tedious to you, Señor, I would beg you to do me the favour of speaking Spanish for the remainder of the evening, as I find it exceedingly difficult to make myself quite clearly understood in English.”

Jack having expressed his perfect readiness to fall in with this suggestion, Don Hermoso continued:

“Carlos has been telling me what passed between you and him to-day, Señor Singleton, and although I was naturally somewhat disinclined to give an unqualified assent to his suggestion before I had seen you, permit me to say that now, having seen, watched, and conversed with you, nothing will give me greater pleasure than to endorse his proposal, unless it be to hear that you agree to it.”

“To be perfectly candid, Don Hermoso, I feel very strongly inclined to do so,” answered Jack. “But before I can possibly give my assent to Carlos’s proposal you must permit me to clearly indicate the risks to you involved in it. You know absolutely nothing of me, Señor, beyond what you have learned from your son; and it is in the highest degree essential that you should clearly understand that what Carlos suggested to me this afternoon involves you in the risk of losing your yacht, for the carrying into effect of that proposal would make the vessel positively my own, to do as I pleased with; and if I should choose to retain possession of her, neither you nor anybody else could prevent me.”

“I very clearly understand all that, my dear young friend,” answered Don Hermoso, “and I am perfectly willing to take the risks, for several reasons. In the first place, if you were the kind of individual to do what you have just suggested, I do not for an instant believe that you would have warned me that the proposal involved me in the risk of losing my yacht. In the next place, although, as you say, I know little or nothing about you, my son Carlos knows you pretty intimately, and I can rely upon his judgment of you. And, finally, I do not believe that any Englishman in your position would or could be guilty of such infamous conduct as you have suggested. The fact is that we shall certainly be obliged to trust somebody—for if it were once known that the yacht belonged to me she would be so strictly watched that we could do little or nothing with her; and I would naturally trust you, rather than a stranger.”

“Of course,” answered Jack, “that is only natural, and I can quite understand it. Nevertheless I will not give you an answer at present; you must have sufficient time to think the matter over at leisure, and perhaps while doing so you may hit upon some alternative scheme that will suit you better. Meanwhile, let me tell you of a little adventure that I had this afternoon, just after I had parted from you, Carlos—and its continuation this evening. It will perhaps interest you, for I am greatly mistaken if it does not concern you both, even more than it does me.”

And therewith Jack proceeded to give a humorous relation of his two encounters with the foreign-looking gentleman claiming to be one of the Mackintoshes of Inveraray. When at length he finished, father and son looked at each other with glances of alarm, and simultaneously exclaimed:

“Now, who can that possibly be?”

“Your description of the man does not in the least degree suggest any particular individual to me,” continued Don Hermoso; “but that, of course, is not surprising, for a man must have a singularly striking personality to allow of his being identified from verbal description only. But let him be who he may, I am quite disposed to agree with you that his object in accosting you this afternoon was to enable him to familiarise himself with your personal appearance; while the fact that you caught him watching the hotel this evening would seem to indicate that our presence in London is known, and that our visit is regarded with a certain amount of suspicion. This only strengthens my conviction that your aid, my dear Señor Singleton, will be of the greatest value to us, if we can succeed in persuading you to give it.”

Don Hermoso’s manner was such as to leave no room for doubt in the mind of Singleton as to the sincerity of the Cuban, while the latter and his son were easily able to see that their proposal strongly appealed to the adventurous spirit of the young Englishman: it is therefore not surprising that ere they parted that evening Singleton had definitely agreed to become, for the time being, the apparent owner of the new steam-yacht, and to take part in the gun-running adventure; also agreeing to take along with him the working model of his submarine, which all three were of opinion might be found exceedingly useful, while the service upon which they were about to engage would afford Jack an opportunity to put the craft to the test of actual work.

These important points having been arranged, it was further agreed that, since the two Montijos were evidently under Spanish surveillance, they should advertise their connection with the yacht as little as possible, leaving the matters of the final trials of the vessel, the payment of the last instalment of her cost, and her transfer to Jack’s ownership entirely in the hands of the agent who had thus far managed the business for them; taking a holiday on

the Continent, meanwhile, and joining the vessel only at the last moment prior to her departure for Cuba. And it was further arranged that the ordering and shipment of the arms, ammunition, and supplies destined for the use of the insurgents should also be left absolutely in the hands of the agent and Jack conjointly; by which means the Montijos would effectually avoid embroilment with the Spanish authorities, while it was hoped that, by occupying the attention of those authorities themselves, that attention would be completely diverted from Jack and the yacht. The settlement of these details and of others incidental to them kept the three conspirators busy until nearly midnight, when Jack rose to go, having already arranged to leave the hotel by the side entrance in order to baffle the eminently respectable "Mr Mackintosh", should that individual happen to be still on the watch. As it happened, he was; for upon leaving the hotel Jack sauntered along the Embankment as far as Waterloo Bridge, then made his way up into Lancaster Place, and there took a cab, in which he drove up the Strand, where he saw his man, evidently on guard, strolling slowly to and fro in front of the main entrance to the Cecil.

Now Jack, although a yacht owner, was not a member of any yacht club, his cutter *Lalage* being such an out-of-date craft, and so seldom in use, that he had not thus far thought it worth while to very intimately identify himself with what is the Englishman's pastime *par excellence*. But as he thought over the events of the evening while smoking a final pipe before turning in that night, it occurred to him that if he was to successfully pose as the owner of a fine new steam-yacht, it was imperative that he should become a member of some smart club; and as he happened to have two or three intimate friends who belonged to the Royal Thames, he decided upon attempting to procure election into that somewhat exclusive club. Accordingly, the next morning he addressed letters to those friends, requesting them to undertake the matter of his election, with the result, it may here be mentioned, that about three weeks later he received a communication from the secretary of the club, intimating his enrolment, and requesting the payment of his entrance fee and first subscription. This matter having been attended to, Jack next addressed a letter to Señor Montijo's agent, making an appointment with him for the afternoon; and then went out to interview his tailor and outfitter, for the purpose of procuring a suitable outfit.

Then it occurred to him that for the especial work which the new yacht was required to do she would need a first-rate crew, every man of whom must be absolutely to be depended upon under all circumstances. The eight or ten hands comprising the crew of the *Lalage* were all well-known to him, having indeed belonged to the cutter for years, while she was still the property of Jack's father, and they would doubtless serve as the nucleus of the new ship's crew: but of course they would go but a little way towards the manning of a steam-yacht of three hundred and forty tons measurement; while Perkins, satisfactory as he had proved himself in his capacity of skipper of the cutter, would never do as commander of the new ship—though he might perhaps make a very good chief officer. Having arrived at this point in his meditations, Jack suddenly bethought himself of Lieutenant Philip Milsom, R.N. (retired), who would make a perfectly ideal skipper for the new craft, and would probably be glad enough to get to sea again for a few months, and supplement his scanty income by drawing the handsome pay which the captain of a first-class modern steam-yacht can command. Whereupon the young man turned into the next telegraph office that he came to, and dispatched a wire to Milsom, briefly informing him that he had heard of a berth which he thought would suit him, and requesting him to call at Morley's Hotel on the following day. And at lunch-time Jack received a letter from Carlos Montijo, announcing the departure of his father and himself for Paris, *en route* for Switzerland, and containing an itinerary and list of dates for Singleton's guidance in the event of his finding it necessary to communicate with them.

Jack had finished his luncheon, and was taking a cup of coffee with his cigarette in the smoke-room, when a waiter entered, bearing a card the owner of which was enquiring for Mr Singleton. The card bore the name of "James M. Nisbett", and Jack knew that Señor Montijo's agent had arrived. He accordingly directed the waiter to show Mr Nisbett up into his private sitting-room.

Mr Nisbett was one of those agents whose business is generally brought to them by foreign and colonial clients; and his transactions consisted of obtaining for and forwarding to those clients anything and everything that they might chance to require, whether it happened to be a pocket knife, a bridal trousseau, or several hundred miles of railway; a needle, or an anchor. And, being a keen man of business, it was only necessary to mention to him the kind of article required, and he was at once prepared to say where that article might be best obtained. Also, being a tremendously busy man, he was wont to get straight to business, without any circumlocution; and he did so in the present instance by producing a letter which he had that morning received from Don Hermoso Montijo, detailing the arrangement arrived at on the previous night between himself and Jack, and authorising Nisbett to act upon Jack's instructions precisely as though these instructions emanated directly from Don Hermoso himself. This letter very effectually cleared the ground, and Jack at once began to detail to Nisbett full particulars of all the arms, ammunition, stores, and articles generally which it was intended to put on board the yacht for conveyance to Cuba; after which arrangements were made for the final trials of the yacht prior to her acceptance by Nisbett on behalf of his clients, and her subsequent transference to Jack's ownership. It was perfectly clear to Jack that this last arrangement was distinctly unpalatable to Nisbett, who thought he saw in it some deep-laid scheme for the theft of the yacht from her actual owners; but when Jack explained the reasons which had actuated the Montijos in making the proposal, and further cheerfully offered to consent to any alternative scheme which would achieve the same result, the man at once gave in, frankly admitting that the arrangement already come to was the best that could be suggested. He remained with Jack two full hours, carefully discussing with him every point affecting the success of the expedition; and when at length he retired he was fully primed with all the information necessary to enable him to satisfactorily perform his share of the task.

The following morning brought Jack a visitor of a very different but equally thorough type, in the person of Lieutenant Philip Milsom, R.N., who sent in his card while the young man was still dawdling over a rather late breakfast.

"Bring the gentleman in here," ordered Jack; and a minute later the waiter re-appeared, conducting a dapper-looking, clean-shaven man of medium height, attired in a suit of blue serge, the double-breasted jacket of which he wore buttoned tight to his body. This individual spotted Jack instantly, and, pushing the waiter on one side, bustled up with outstretched hand to the table at which the young man was sitting, exclaiming in a brisk, cheery voice:

"Hillo, Jack, my hearty, what cheer? Gad! what a big lump of a chap you have become since I saw you last—how long

ago?—ay, it must be more than two years. But, nevertheless, I should have known you anywhere, from your striking likeness to your poor father. Well, and how are you, my lad, eh? Not very much the matter with you, I should say—and yet I don't know; you look a trifle chalky about the gills, and your clothes seem to hang rather more loosely than they should. What have you been doing with yourself, eh?"

"Oh, nothing very dreadful!" laughed Jack, "only overworking myself a trifle, so I am told. But sit down, there's a good fellow, and—have you breakfasted, by the way?"

"Breakfasted very nearly three hours ago, my boy," was the answer. "But if you want me to join you—I see you are still busy at it—don't be bashful, but say so straight out, and I'll not refuse, for the journey up has given me a fresh appetite."

"That's right," said Jack. "Now, which will you have, coffee or tea? And you can take your choice of ham and eggs, steak, chop, and fish."

"Thanks!" said Milsom, "I'll take coffee—and a steak, rather underdone. And while the steak is getting ready I'll amuse myself with one of those rolls and a pat of butter, if you don't mind. I got your telegram, by the way, or of course I shouldn't be here. What is the job, my boy, eh? I suppose it is something that a gentleman may undertake, or you wouldn't have thought of me, eh?"

"Of course," said Jack; "that is to say, I think so. But you must judge for yourself whether the post is such as you would care to accept. The fact is that, as I told you just now, I have been overworking myself; and a specialist whom I have come down here to consult tells me that I must take a long holiday in the open air. I have therefore decided to go on a yachting cruise—to the West Indies, probably—and I want you to take command of the ship for me. She is a brand-new, three-hundred-and-forty-ton steam-yacht, of eight hundred indicated horse-power, and her guaranteed sea speed is twenty-two knots."

Milsom pursed up his lips and gave vent to a prolonged whistle as Jack enunciated these particulars; then his features relaxed into a broad smile as he extended his right hand across the table to Jack, exclaiming:

"I'm your man! As I came along in the train this morning I was cogitating what was the smallest amount of pay that I would take for this job—whatever it might be; but, by the piper, Jack, the mere pleasure of commanding such a craft would be payment enough for me, and I'm quite willing to take it on free, gratis, and for nothing, if you say so."

"The pay," said Jack, "will be at the rate of thirty pounds sterling per calendar month, with uniform and your keep, of course, thrown in."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Milsom enthusiastically. "You may take it that upon these terms I accept the command of the—what's her name?"

"She is so new," said Jack, "that she has not yet been given a name. At present she is known simply as Number 78. But"—lowering his voice—"I have not yet told you everything; you had better wait until you have heard all that I have to say before you definitely decide. Meanwhile, here comes your steak and some fresh coffee, so you had better get your breakfast; and when you have finished we will both go up to my private room."

"Right ho!" acquiesced Milsom, who forthwith turned his attention to his second breakfast, saying very little more until he intimated that he had finished, and was now quite ready to resume the discussion of the matter that had brought him up to town. Accordingly, Jack conducted his friend up to his private sitting-room, waved him into a chair, and took one himself.

"Ah!" exclaimed Milsom, in a tone that conveyed his complete satisfaction with things in general; "this is all right. I suppose, by the way, a chap may smoke here, mayn't he?"

"Of course," said Jack; "smoke away as hard as you please, old man. Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks," answered the Navy man; "good, honest, stick tobacco, smoked out of a well-seasoned brier, is good enough for me—unless one can get hold of a real, genuine Havana, you know; but they are scarcely to be had in these days."

"All the same, I think we may perhaps manage to get hold of one or two where we are going," said Jack; "that is to say, if you are still willing to take on the job after you have heard what I am bound to tell you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Milsom; "something in the background, eh? Well, it can't be very terrible, I fancy, Jack, or you would not be mixed up in it. However, heave ahead, my lad, and let us hear the worst, without further parley."

"Well," said Jack, "the fact is that the yachting trip is all a 'blind', and is in reality neither more nor less than a gun-running expedition in aid of the Cuban revolutionaries. And the yacht is really not mine, but belongs to a certain very wealthy Cuban gentleman who, being, like most Cubans, utterly sick of the Spanish misgovernment of the island, has thrown in his lot with the patriots, and has had the craft specially built for their service. But, recognising that to declare his ownership of her would at once arouse the suspicion of the Spaniards, and attract a tremendous amount of unwelcome attention to her, he has persuaded me to assume the apparent ownership of the vessel, and to undertake a trip to the West Indies in her, ostensibly for my health, but actually to run into the island a consignment of arms and ammunition, and otherwise to assist the patriots in every possible way."

"I see," observed Milsom thoughtfully. "That means, of course, that I should really be in the service of the Cuban gentleman, instead of in yours. That makes a very important difference, Jack, for, you see, I shall have to look to him, instead of to you, for my pay; and smuggling contraband of war is a very different matter from navigating a

gentleman's private yacht, and is work for which I shall expect to be well paid."

"Then am I to understand that you regard thirty pounds per month as insufficient?" demanded Jack.

"Not at all, my dear boy," answered Milsom quickly, "do not misunderstand me; I am quite content with the pay, but as the service is one that I can see with half an eye will involve a good deal of risk, I want to be quite certain of getting it. Now, is your friend to be absolutely depended upon in that respect? You see, if this insurrection should fail—as it probably will—your friend may be killed, or imprisoned, and all his property confiscated; and then I may whistle for my money."

"I think not," said Jack. "For my friend has left the management of everything in my hands, and I will see that you are all right. But I am very glad that you have raised the point; for it has enabled me to see that the proper thing will be to deposit a sufficient sum in an English bank to cover the pay of all hands for a period of—well, say twelve months. What do you say to that?"

"I say," answered Milsom, "that it will be quite the proper thing to do, and will smooth away a very serious difficulty. But, Jack, my boy, has it occurred to you that you will be running a good many quite unnecessary risks by mixing yourself up in this affair? For you must remember that we may be compelled to fight, before all is done; while, if we are captured, it may mean years of imprisonment in a Spanish penal settlement, which will be no joke, I can assure you, my lad!"

"Ah!" answered Jack. "To be quite frank, I had not thought of the last contingency you mention. But 'in for a penny, in for a pound'; I'll take the risk, and trust to my usual good luck to keep me out of a Spanish prison. The fact is, Phil, that I am fairly aching for a bit of adventure, and I simply must have it."

"Very well," said Milsom grimly; "I think you have hit upon a most excellent scheme for getting it! My advice to you, Jack, is to leave the whole thing severely alone; but, whether you do or not, I am in it, so please give me your orders. And, mind you, Jack, I take them from you, and from nobody else."

"Very well," said Jack. "It may be necessary for you to modify that resolution later on, but let that pass; at present, at all events, you will receive all instructions from me, and regard me as the owner of the vessel. Now the first thing to be done is to secure a good crew; and, as I have told you precisely the kind of work that will have to be done, I shall look to you to provide the right sort of officers and men. I suppose you will have to give them a hint that they will be required to do something more than mere everyday yachting work—and you must arrange their pay accordingly; but, while doing this, you must be careful not to let out the true secret, or it will not remain such for very long. And you need not trouble to provide the engine-room staff; I think I can manage that part of the business myself."

"I see," answered Milsom. "You wish me to engage merely the officers, seamen, and stewards? Very well. How many guns will she carry?"

"Guns?" echoed Jack. "By Jove, I had not thought of that! Will she need any guns?"

"She certainly will, if she is to be as useful as she ought to be," answered Milsom.

"Um!" said Jack; "that complicates matters a bit, doesn't it? I am afraid that I must refer that point to Señor Montijo, the actual owner. What sort of armament would you recommend for such a craft, Phil?"

"Oh! not a very heavy one," answered Milsom; "probably four 12-pounders, of the latest pattern, and a couple of Maxims would be sufficient."

Jack made a note of these particulars for reference to Señor Montijo, and then said:

"Now, is there anything else that you can think of, Phil?"

"Nothing except an outfit of small arms—rifles, revolvers, and cutlasses, you know, for the crew," answered Milsom. "If anything else should occur to me I will write and mention it."

"Very well; pray do so," said Jack. "Now, I think that is all for the present. Pick a first-class, thoroughly reliable crew, Phil. I give you a week in which to look for them, by which time I expect the boat will be ready to receive them. Then you can bring them all north with you, and we will ship them in the proper orthodox style. Now, good-bye; and good luck to you in your search!"

Chapter Three.

The S.Y. Thetis, R.T.Y.C.

The next day was spent by Jack, at Mr Nisbett's invitation, in visiting, in the company of that gentleman, the establishments of certain manufacturers of firearms, where he very carefully inspected and tested the several weapons submitted to him for approval; finally selecting a six-shot magazine rifle, which was not only a most excellent weapon in all other respects, but one especially commending itself to him on account of the simplicity of its mechanism, which he believed would prove to be a very strong point in its favour when put into the hands of such comparatively unintelligent persons as he strongly suspected the rank and file of the Cuban insurgents would prove to be. He also decided upon an exceedingly useful pattern of sword-bayonet to go with the rifle, and also a six-shot revolver of an especially efficient character; and there and then gave the order—through Mr Nisbett—for as large a number of these weapons, together with ammunition for the same, as he believed the yacht could conveniently stow away. This done, he returned to his hotel, reaching it just in good time for dinner; and devoted the evening to the

concoction of a letter to Señor Montijo, at Lucerne, reporting all that he had thus far done, also referring to Don Hermoso the important question of the yacht's armament, and somewhat laboriously transcribing the said letter into cipher.

Jack's business in London was now done; on the following morning, therefore, he took train back to Newcastle. He called upon Mr Murdock, his partner, in the evening, explaining the arrangement which he had made to pay a visit to Cuba, including the rather singular proposal of Señor Montijo to which he had consented, as to the apparent ownership of the new yacht; and listened patiently but unconvinced to all Murdock's arguments against what the canny Northumbrian unhesitatingly denounced as an utterly hare-brained scheme. The next two days he devoted to the task of putting all his affairs in order, lest anything serious should happen to him during the progress of his adventure; and on the third day Nisbett presented himself, with his consulting naval architect, to witness the final trials of the yacht before accepting her, on behalf of Señor Montijo, from the builders. These trials were of a most searching and exhaustive character, lasting over a full week, at the end of which came the coal-consumption test, consisting of a non-stop run northward at full speed, through the Pentland Firth, round Cape Wrath; then southward outside the Hebrides and past the west coast of Ireland, thence from Mizen Head across to Land's End; up the English Channel and the North Sea, to her starting-point. The run down past the west coast of Ireland, and part of the way up the Channel, was accomplished in the face of a stiff south-westerly gale and through a very heavy sea, in which the little craft behaved magnificently, the entire trial, from first to last, being of the most thoroughly satisfactory character, and evoking the unmeasured admiration of the naval architect under whose strict supervision it was performed. Jack was on board throughout the trial, as the representative of the builders, and his experience of the behaviour of the boat was such as to fill him with enthusiasm and delight at the prospect of the coming trip. The contract was certified as having been faithfully and satisfactorily completed, the final instalment of the contract price was paid, and Nisbett, on behalf of Señor Montijo, took over the vessel from the builders, at once transferring the ownership of her to Jack. Meanwhile a letter had arrived from Señor Montijo, authorising the arming of the ship in accordance with Milsom's suggestion, and the *Thetis*, as she had been named, was once more laid alongside the wharf to receive certain extra fittings which were required to admit of the prompt mounting of her artillery when occasion should seem to so require.

In the meantime Jack had written to Milsom, extending the time allowed the latter in which to pick up a suitable crew, and at the same time suggesting that Perkins and the rest of the crew of the *Lalage* should be afforded an opportunity to join the *Thetis*, should they care to do so, subject, of course, to Milsom's approval of them; and by the time that the extra fittings were in place, and the little ship drydocked and repainted outside, the Navy man had come north with his retinue, and the hands were duly shipped, Jack having, with the assistance of the superintendent of his fitting-shops, meanwhile selected a first-rate engine-room staff and stokehold crew.

The completing of all these arrangements carried the time on to the last week of July; and on the 28th day of that month the *Thetis* steamed down the Tyne on her way to Cowes, Jack having decided to give as much vraisemblance as possible to his apparent ownership of the vessel, and to the pretence that he was yachting for health's sake, by putting in the month of August in the Solent, during which the order for arms, ammunition, etcetera, would be in process of execution. Although Jack was not a racing man—the *Lalage* being of altogether too ancient a type to pose as a racer—he was by no means unknown in the yachting world, and he found a host of acquaintances ready and willing to welcome his appearance in Cowes Roads, especially coming as he did in such a fine, handsome little ship as the *Thetis*; and for the first fortnight of the racing the new steamer, with her burgee and blue ensign, was a quite conspicuous object as, with large parties of friends, both male and female, on board, she followed the racers up and down the sparkling waters of the Solent. Jack was precisely of that light-hearted, joyous temperament which can find unalloyed pleasure amid such surroundings, and he threw himself heart and soul into the daily gaieties with an abandon that was sufficient, one would have thought, to have utterly destroyed all possible suspicion as to the existence of ulterior motives. Yet, happening to be ashore one afternoon with a party of friends, he was startled, as they walked down the High Street at Cowes, to see coming toward him a man whom he believed he had met somewhere before. The individual did not appear to be taking very particular notice of anything just at the moment, seeming indeed to be sunk deep in thought; but when he was about ten yards from Jack's party he suddenly looked up and found the young man's eyes fixed enquiringly upon him. For an instant he stopped dead, and an expression of mingled annoyance and fear flashed into his eyes; then he turned quickly and sprang, as if affrighted, into the door of a shop opposite which he had paused. But in that instant Jack remembered him; he was "Mr Mackintosh, of Inveraray!"

"Now what, in the name of fortune, is that chap doing down here?" wondered Singleton. "Is it accident and coincidence only, or has he discovered something, and come down here to watch my doings and those of the yacht? That is a very difficult question to answer, for one meets all sorts of people at Cowes during August; yet that fellow does not look as though he knew enough about yachts to have been attracted here by the racing. And he was evidently desirous of avoiding recognition by me, or why did he bolt into that shop as he did? I am prepared to swear that he did not want to buy anything; he had not the remotest intention of entering the place until he saw me. Of course that may have been because of the scare I gave him that night at the Cecil—or, on the other hand, it may have been because he did not wish me to know that he was anywhere near me. Anyhow, it does not matter, for my doings down here have been absolutely innocent, and such as to disarm even the suspicion of a suspicious Spanish spy; and in any case he cannot very well follow me wherever I go. Perhaps before the month is out his suspicions—if he has any—will be laid at rest, since I am just now doing absolutely nothing to foster or strengthen them, and he will come to the conclusion that there is no need to watch me. But I am very glad that the idea occurred to me of never running the boat at a higher speed than fourteen knots while we have been down here; there is nothing to be gained by giving away her real speed, and—who knows?—a little harmless deception in that matter may one day stand us in good stead."

Thenceforward, whenever Jack had occasion to go ashore, he always kept a particularly smart lookout for "Mr Mackintosh"; but he saw him no more during the remainder of his stay in the Solent. Yet a few days later an incident occurred which, although unmarked by any pronounced significance, rather tended to impress upon Jack the

conviction that somebody was evincing a certain amount of interest in the speed qualifications of the *Thetis*, although it was quite possible that he might have been mistaken. This incident took the form of a somewhat sudden proposal to get up a race for steam-yachts round the island, for a cup of the value of fifty guineas. Such a proposal was a little remarkable, from the fact that steam-yacht racing is a form of sport that is very rarely indulged in by Englishmen, at least in English waters; yet everything must necessarily have a beginning, and there was no especial reason why steam-yacht racing should not be one of those things, particularly as the idea appeared to be received with some enthusiasm by certain owners of such craft. When the matter was first mentioned to Singleton, and it was suggested that he should enter the *Thetis* for the race, he evinced a disposition to regard the proposal with coldness, as he had already arrived at the conclusion that it might be unwise to reveal the boat's actual capabilities; but his attitude was so strongly denounced as unsportsmanlike, and he found himself subjected to such urgent solicitations—not to say pressure—that he quickly grew suspicious, and mentioned the matter to Milsom. Milsom, in turn, after considering the matter for a little, suggested that the chief engineer of the boat should be consulted, with the result that it was ultimately decided to enter the *Thetis* for the race, Macintyre undertaking that while the yacht should present to onlookers every appearance of being pushed to the utmost—plenty of steam blowing off, and so on—her speed should not be permitted to exceed fifteen knots, and only be allowed to reach that at brief intervals during the race. With this understanding Jack agreed to enter, and the race duly came off in splendid weather, and was pronounced to be a brilliant success, the *Thetis* coming in third, but losing the race by only eight seconds on her time allowance. Nobody was perhaps better pleased at the result than Jack, for the new boat made a brave show and apparently struggled gamely throughout the race to win the prize, the "white feather" showing from first to last on the top of her waste pipe, and a thin but continuous film of light-brown smoke issuing from her funnel from start to finish. If anyone happened to have taken the trouble to get up the race with the express object of ascertaining the best speed of the *Thetis*, they knew it now; it was fourteen knots, rising to nearly fifteen for a few minutes occasionally when the conditions were especially favourable!

With the approach of the end of the month the yachts began to thin out more and more perceptibly every day, the racers going westward and the cruisers following them; the steam-yachts hanging on to accompany the Channel Match to Weymouth. The *Thetis* was one of these; and Jack allowed it to be pretty generally understood that after the Weymouth regatta was over he intended to run north for a month or so, visiting the Baltic, and perhaps proceeding as far east as Cronstadt. But yachtsmen are among the most capricious of men—some of them never know from one moment to another what they really intend to do; thus it is, after all, not very surprising that when the *Thetis* arrived off the mouth of the Tyne Jack Singleton should suddenly give orders for her nose to be turned shoreward, and that, an hour or two later, she should glide gently up alongside and make fast to the private wharf of Singleton, Murdock, and Company. What is surprising is that, when she was seen approaching, some fifty of Singleton, Murdock, and Company's most trusty hands received sudden notice that they were required for an all-night job; and that at dawn the next morning the *Thetis* drew a full foot more water than she had done when she ran alongside the wharf some twelve hours earlier, although in the interim she had not taken an ounce of coal into her bunkers.

It so happened that Mr Murdock was absent on important business when the *Thetis* arrived alongside the wharf, and he did not return to Newcastle until nearly midnight, when he, of course, made the best of his way to his own house. But he was at the works betimes next morning, and, knowing that the yacht was expected, he took the wharf on his way to the office, with the object of ascertaining whether she had arrived. The sight of her lying alongside in all her bravery of white enamel paint, gilt mouldings, and polished brasswork caused him to heave a great sigh of relief; and he joyously hurried forward to greet Jack, whom he saw standing on the wharf engaged in earnest conversation with the yard foreman.

"Good-morning, Singleton!—Morning, Price!" he exclaimed as he approached the two. "Well, Jack," he continued, "so you arrived up to time, eh? And by the look of the boat I should say that you've got the stuff on board; is that so? Ah! that's all right; I am precious glad to hear it, I can tell you, for to have those cases accumulating here day after day has been a source of great anxiety to me."

"Sorry!" remarked Jack cheerfully. "But why should they worry you, old chap? Everything is securely packed in air-tight, zinc-lined cases, so that there was really no very serious cause for anxiety or fear, even of an explosion. Such a thing could not possibly happen except by the downright deliberate act of some evil—disposed individual; and I don't think—"

"Precisely," interrupted Murdock; "that was just what was worrying me—at least, it was one of the things that was worrying me. Not on account of our own people, mind you; I believe them to be loyal and trustworthy to a man. But I cannot help thinking that some hint of your expedition must have leaked out, for we have never had so many strangers about the place since I have been in the business as we have had during the last fortnight, while those cases have been arriving. We have simply been overwhelmed with business enquiries of every description—enquiries as to our facilities for the execution of repairs; enquiries as to the quickest time in which we could build and deliver new ships; enquiries respecting new engines and machinery of every conceivable kind, not one of which will probably come to anything. And the thing that troubled me most was that every one of these people wanted to be shown over the place from end to end, in order that they might judge for themselves, as they explained, whether our works were sufficiently extensive and up-to-date to enable us to execute the particular kind of work that they wanted done: and every mother's son of them gravitated, sooner or later, to the spot where those precious cases of yours were stacked, and seemed profoundly interested in them; while one chap, who was undoubtedly a foreigner, had the impudence to insinuate that the marks and addresses on the cases, indicating that they were sugar machinery for Mauritius, were bogus! I sent him to the rightabout pretty quickly, I can tell you. Why, what the dickens are you laughing at, man? It is no laughing matter, I give you my word!"

For Jack had burst into a fit of hearty laughter at Murdock's righteous indignation.

"No, no; of course not, old chap," answered Jack, manfully struggling to suppress his mirth; "awfully annoying it must have been, I'm sure. Well, is that all?"

"No," answered Murdock indignantly, "it is not; nor is it the worst. Only the day before yesterday we had a man poking about here who said he was from the Admiralty. He wanted nothing in particular for the moment, he said, but was simply making a tour of the principal shipyards of the country, with the view of ascertaining what were the facilities of each for the execution of Admiralty work. He, too, was vastly interested in those precious cases of yours, so much so, indeed, that I should not have been at all surprised if he had asked to have the whole lot of them opened! Oh, yes! of course I know he could not have gone to such a length as that without assigning some good and sufficient reason; but I tell you, Jack, that we are playing a dangerous game, and I will not be a party to a repetition of it. A pretty mess we should be in if the British Government were to discover that we are aiding and abetting insurgents in arms against the authority of a friendly Power! Why, it would mean nothing short of ruin—absolute ruin—to us!"

"Yes, you are quite right, old chap, it would," agreed Jack soberly; "and if Señor Montijo wants to ship any more stuff after this, it must not be through this yard. But it is all aboard and out of sight now, and we leave for—um—Mauritius, shall we say?—this afternoon; so there is no need for you to worry any further about it."

"Well, to be perfectly candid with you, Jack," said Murdock, "I shall not be at all sorry to see the *Thetis* safely away from this and on her way down the river, for I shall not be quite comfortable and easy in my mind until I do. And you will have to be very careful what you are about, my boy; 'there is no smoke without fire', and all this fuss and prying about of which I have been telling you means something, you may depend. It would not very greatly surprise me if you discover that you are being followed and watched."

"We must take our chance of that," laughed Jack. "Not that I am very greatly afraid. The fact is, Murdock, that you are constitutionally a nervous man, and you have worried yourself into a perfect state of scare over this business. But never mind, your anxiety will soon be over now, for here comes our coal, if I am not mistaken; and I promise you that we will be off the moment that we have taken our last sack on board. But I will run into the office and say good-bye before I go."

The church clocks were just striking two when, Jack having duly fulfilled his promise to say good-bye to his partner, and to exchange a final word or two with him, the *Thetis* cast off from the wharf, backed out into the stream, and, swinging round, swept away down the river at the modest rate of fourteen knots, that being her most economical speed, and the pace at which, in order to make her coal last out, it had been decided that she should cross the Atlantic. She sat very deep in the water, and her decks, fore and aft, were packed with coal, in sacks so closely stowed that there was only a narrow gangway left between them from the foot of the ladder abaft the deck-house to the companion, and a similar gangway from the fore end of the bridge deck to the fore-castle. If it was necessary for the men to pass to any other part of the ship, such as to the ensign staff, for instance, they had to climb over the sacks. She was particularly well equipped with boats, too: there were a steam pinnace and a whaler in chocks on the starboard side of the deck-house, balanced by the lifeboat and cutter on the other; and she carried no less than four fine, wholesome boats at her davits aft, all nicely covered over with canvas, to protect them from the sun—and also, in one case, to screen from too curious eyes Jack's submarine, which was snugly stowed away in the largest quarter boat, that craft having had her thwarts removed to make room for the submarine. Twenty-six hours later, namely, at four o'clock on the following afternoon, the *Thetis* anchored off Boulogne; the steam pinnace was lowered, and Jack, accompanied by four seamen, proceeded into the harbour, landing at the steps near the railway station. From thence it was a very short walk to the hotel to which he was bound; and in a few minutes he was at his destination, enquiring for Monsieur Robinson. "Yes," he was informed, "Monsieur Robeenson was in, and was expecting a Monsieur Singleton. Possibly Monsieur might be the gentleman in question?" Jack confessed that he was; and, being piloted upstairs, was presently shown into a room where he found Don Hermoso Montijo and his son Carlos obviously waiting for him. As he entered they both sprang to their feet and advanced toward him with outstretched hands.

"Ah, Señor Singleton," exclaimed Don Hermoso, "punctual to the minute, or, rather"—glancing at his watch—"a few minutes before your time! We duly received your wire in Paris this morning, and came on forthwith. I am delighted to learn that everything has gone so smoothly. Do I understand that you are now ready to sail for Cuba?"

"Certainly, Don Hermoso," answered Jack; "we can be under way in half an hour from this, if you like; or whenever you please. It is for you to say when you would like to start."

"Then in that case we may as well be off at once," said Don Hermoso. "For the first fortnight or three weeks of our tour through Switzerland we were undoubtedly the objects of a great deal of interested attention, but latterly we have not been so acutely conscious of being followed and watched; everything that we did was so perfectly open and frank that I think the persons who had us under surveillance must have become convinced that their suspicions of us were groundless, and consequently they relaxed their attentions. And I believe that we managed to get away from Paris this morning without being followed. If that is the case we have of course managed to throw the watchers off the scent, for the moment at least, and it will no doubt be wise to get away from here before it is picked up again. I hope that you, Señor, have not been subjected to any annoyance of that kind?"

"No," said Jack laughingly, "I have not, beyond meeting at Cowes with that man who called himself Mackintosh—of which I informed you in one of my letters—I have had little or no cause to believe that I have become an object of suspicion to the Spanish Government. It is true that a race for steam-yachts was got up, a little while before I left the Solent, under circumstances which suggested to me that an attempt was being made to ascertain the best speed of the *Thetis*; but the attempt might have existed only in my imagination, and if it was otherwise, the plan was defeated, so no harm was done. But my partner has been a good deal worried recently by the incursions of a number of inquisitive strangers, who have obtruded themselves upon him and invaded our works with what he considers very inadequate excuses. His fixed impression is that a whisper was somehow allowed to get abroad that arms, ammunition, and stores were to be shipped from our yard for the use of the Cuban insurgents, and that the inquisitive strangers were neither more nor less than emissaries of the Spanish Government, sent down to investigate into the truth of the matter. They one and all appear to have betrayed a quite remarkable amount of interest in the cases, and one individual at least seems to have pretty broadly hinted his doubts as to the

genuineness of the markings on them. Also, our own Government appears to have received a hint of what we were doing, and to have sent a man down to investigate; I am afraid, therefore, that despite all our precautions, we have not wholly succeeded in avoiding suspicion. And if such should be the case it will be a pity, for it will certainly mean trouble for us all later on."

"The stronger the reason why we should start without further delay," said Don Hermoso. "Carlos, oblige me by ringing the bell."

The bell was rung, the bill asked for and paid, the various servants generously tipped, and the little party set out. The Montijos' luggage had been left in the hall of the hotel: there was nothing therefore but for the four seamen to seize it, shoulder it, and carry it down to the pinnace; and this occupied but a few minutes. A quarter of an hour later the party had gained the deck of the yacht, and the pinnace was once more reposing in her chocks on the bridge deck.

"Get your anchor up, Mr Milsom, if you please," said Jack, allowing his eyes to stray shoreward as Milsom repeated the order to the mate. As he looked, he became aware of something in the nature of a commotion or disturbance at the end of the pier; and, entering the chart-house, he brought forth a pair of splendid binoculars with which to investigate. Upon applying the glasses to his eyes he saw that there was a little crowd of perhaps fifty people gathered on the pier end, all eagerly listening to a man who was talking and gesticulating with great vehemence as he pointed excitedly toward the yacht. The man appeared to be particularly addressing two gendarmes who were among the crowd, but everybody was clustering close round him and listening, apparently in a state of the greatest excitement, to what he had to say, while occasionally one or another in the crowd would face seaward and shake his fist savagely at the yacht.

"Come here a moment, Carlos," called Jack. "I want you to look through these glasses at the mob gathered yonder on the pier end, and especially at the excited individual in their midst, and tell me whether you remember having ever seen him before."

Young Montijo took the glasses from Jack, looked intently through them for a full minute, and then turned to Singleton, saying:

"Why, yes, of course I do. He is the chap that the Pater and I were constantly meeting, wherever we went, while we were in Switzerland. We met him so repeatedly that at length we could not avoid the conviction that he was dogging our footsteps. On board the steamers, in the trains, even when out driving, it was continually the same; we did not seem able to get away from him. He never took the slightest notice of us, but that only made us suspect him all the more, because in the case of other people, after we had encountered them a few times, many of them bowed to us, some even entered into conversation with us; but although that fellow stopped at the same hotels as we used, and generally contrived to sit at the same table with us, he never allowed himself to show, by so much as a momentary glance, that he had ever seen us before. Oh, yes"—as he again applied the glasses to his eyes—"that is the same man; I could swear to him among a thousand. And what is he after now? Upon my word it looks very much as though he intended to follow us on board here! See, there are two men bringing a boat along toward the steps at the end of the pier, and—yes—by Jove, that is what he means to do! And he is bringing the gendarmes with him! Now what mischief can he possibly be up to? The Pater and I have done nothing—"

"Let me have a look," interrupted Jack, almost snatching the binoculars out of his friend's hand, and putting them up to his eyes.

"Ay," he said, "you are right, Carlos, undoubtedly. There he goes down the steps, with the policemen at his heels. Yes; now they get into the boat and seat themselves. Yes, he is pointing out the yacht to the boatmen, and now they are shoving off and heading this way!—Mr Milsom," he broke off suddenly, "what is the best news with regard to that anchor of ours?"

"Forecastle there!" shouted Milsom; "how are you coming on with your anchor?"

"The cable's almost up and down, sir," answered Perkins, the chief mate, who was standing by the knight-heads and hanging on by the forestay as he leaned over to watch the cable. "We shall break out in about a couple of minutes."

"And it will take that boat ten minutes, at least, to get alongside, even if they keep up their present pace," remarked Jack. "We will get a move on the ship, Phil, as soon as the anchor is out of the ground; I don't very much like the look of those gendarmes in that boat."

"No; nor do I," answered Milsom. "Quartermaster, tend the wheel!"

"But surely they cannot do anything!" exclaimed Carlos. "What could they do?"

"Well," said Jack, "I have heard, before now, of people being arrested upon false charges, either for the purpose of obtaining possession and getting a sight of their private papers; or with the object of detaining them until it became too late for them to accomplish a certain undertaking; or until some other and more serious charge could be trumped up against them, and the necessary witnesses found and coached to procure their conviction. It would be rather a bad thing for Cuba, for instance, if, at this particular juncture in its affairs, your father were clapped in prison and kept there for a couple of years."

"Well, yes, I suppose it would," agreed Carlos.

"Anchor's aweigh, sir!" reported Perkins, at this moment, as the steam windlass, after slowing down until it nearly stopped, suddenly started to clank at racing speed.

"Very good," answered Milsom. "Up with it as fast as you please." Then, with a casual glance at the approaching

boat, which was by this time within about a quarter of a mile of the yacht, he laid his hand upon the engine-room telegraph and signalled: "Quarter speed ahead!"

Chapter Four.

Circumventing the enemy.

"Whither away now, Mr Singleton? Down channel, I suppose?" enquired Milsom, when the yacht began to forge ahead.

"I think not," said Jack. "In view of the fact that there is somebody in that boat who appears to be willing to adopt very energetic measures to get hold of Señor Montijo—or the yacht—it will perhaps be a wise step for us to run a few miles up channel, instead of down, until we get out of sight of any inquisitive eyes which may possibly be watching us: so please shape a course up through the Straits for an hour or two—say two hours; then we can seize a favourable opportunity to turn round and run down channel, hugging the English shore fairly close. But your question reminds me that the time has arrived when we ought to decide for what port we are to make, in order that you may work out your Great Circle courses. What think you, Don Hermoso?" he continued, in Spanish. "Have you any definite idea as to the precise spot which it would be best for us to make for?"

"Really, Señor, that is a detail that I have not yet seriously considered," answered Don Hermoso. "My idea was to get into communication with the Junta as soon as we reach the other side, and learn from them what spot would be the most suitable at which to make the attempt to land our consignment. What think you, Captain Milsom?"

"Where has this Junta of yours established itself?" asked Milsom, also taking up the conversation in Spanish, of which he had a serviceable knowledge. "Would it be possible to get a cable message into their hands from this side without the risk of it being intercepted by the Spaniards?"

"Oh, yes; quite easily!" answered Don Hermoso. "They have established their headquarters in New York, and I could cable to them in cipher, if necessary."

"Then," said Milsom, "if I may be permitted, I would suggest that, since we are now running up channel, it would be a good plan for you to land at Dover, and cable to the Junta the information that you have actually started; that you have some reason to suspect that we have not altogether escaped the suspicion of the Spanish authorities, and that consequently the yacht may be watched for, and perhaps followed when we arrive in Cuban waters; and that it would therefore be a very great convenience if, when we get across, we could find a communication awaiting us—say at Key West—giving us the latest information upon the situation generally, and advice as to the most desirable spot at which to attempt the landing of our cargo."

"A most excellent suggestion!" exclaimed Don Hermoso. "Come, gentlemen, let us enter the chart-house and draft the message at once, after which I will transcribe it into cipher in readiness to dispatch it upon our arrival at Dover."

With the exercise of considerable thought and ingenuity a concise rendering of the points suggested by Milsom was at length drafted: and, upon the arrival of the yacht off Dover, Don Hermoso and Singleton went ashore in the steam pinnace and dispatched the message to New York; after which the yacht's bows were turned southward again until she had rounded Beachy Head, when Milsom set the course at west by south for the Lizard, from which headland he intended to take his final "departure". It was just nine o'clock in the evening when the *Thetis* rounded Beachy Head; and at noon next day she was abreast of the Lizard and two miles distant from it.

"A splendid 'departure'!" exclaimed Milsom enthusiastically, when he had taken a careful bearing of the headland. "I now know the ship's position at noon to-day almost to a foot; and I was anxious to make a really good departure, for I have worked out a very elaborate and complete system of Great Circle courses from the Lizard to the north-west end of the Little Bahama Bank, which is a spot that must be hit off very accurately if one would avoid disaster. Thence I shall run down the Florida Strait to Key West, the course which I intend to steer being the shortest possible distance to that spot. And we must not run a mile farther than is necessary, Jack, for Macintyre tells me that it will take him all his time to make his coal last out."

As it happened, there was no cause for apprehension as to the coal lasting out, for when the *Thetis* was two days out from the Lizard she fell in with a fresh easterly wind which enabled her to use her sails to such great advantage that she saved a full day in the run across, steaming in through the East Channel and dropping her anchor in four fathoms of water within half a mile of the town of Key West a few minutes before six o'clock in the evening of her eleventh day out from the Lizard. There were several American men-o'-war of various descriptions, ranging from battleships to torpedo boats, lying at anchor in the roadstead, as well as two cruisers, three gunboats, and a torpedo boat flying the Spanish flag; and Singleton noticed, with mingled concern and amusement, that, as the little *Thetis* swept past the Spanish vessels at close quarters, with the blue burgee and ensign of the "Royal Thames" gaily fluttering from masthead and ensign staff, the yacht was an object of the keenest interest to the officers who were promenading the navigating bridges. A boat from the custom-house, with the health officer of the port in her, came off to the yacht almost as soon as her anchor was down: but as the *Thetis* had a clean bill of health there was no difficulty about getting pratique, and the party might have landed forthwith had they so pleased; they deemed it wise, however, to exercise a certain measure of restraint, by abstaining from landing until the next morning. But although the port authorities were perfectly polite, Singleton thought—or was it only a case of a guilty conscience?—that the custom-house officer betrayed even more than ordinary Yankee curiosity as to the reasons which had prompted Jack to select West Indian waters as the spot in which to pursue his quest of renewed health; and there seemed to be a very marked disposition on the part of the man to indulge in hints and innuendoes suggesting that he was perfectly aware of the existence of a certain something "under the rose", until Singleton at length put a stop to it by asking him, point-blank, what it was at which he was hinting. And when he at length went down the side to return to the shore, he

left a subordinate on board the yacht. The Montijos were very wroth at this act of the customs authorities, which they rather wished Jack to resent as an act of discourtesy on the part of the American Government; but Milsom promptly interposed, explaining matters, while Jack laughed heartily, declaring that there was not the slightest need to worry, since they had nothing in the shape of contraband or otherwise that they wished to land at Key West.

The saloon party breakfasted at nine o'clock the next morning, and, embarking in the steam pinnace about ten, went ashore, ostensibly to enquire at the post office for letters, and to view the quaint little town, but really to visit an agent of the Cuban Junta who was established there; upon whom, however, Don Hermoso did not call until nearly two o'clock in the afternoon, at which hour the streets were practically deserted. The first visit of the party was to the post office, where, as he had expected, Don Hermoso found awaiting him a long letter, written in cipher, from the Junta at New York, cordially thanking him for his generous assistance, and informing him that arrangements had been made for a trusty party to await the arrival of the yacht in the Laguna de Cortes, at the south-west end of Cuba, where everything was to be landed, and where also a pilot would be found waiting to take the yacht into the lagoon. The letter ended up by giving a password which would be evidence of the *bona fides* both of the pilot and of the party who had been told off to receive the contraband.

It soon became apparent to Jack that he and his party were attracting a very considerable amount of attention from certain individuals, who appeared to be following them about the town persistently, and apparently with very little pretence at concealment. It was therefore arranged that when the moment arrived for the visit to be paid to the agent of the Junta, Don Hermoso should pay it alone, Carlos and Jack meanwhile doing their best to decoy the persistent spies in some other direction. But their efforts were of no avail, for it soon became clear that a separate spy had been told off to watch each member of the party; when they separated, therefore, Jack found that while one man remained to watch him, a second followed Don Hermoso, and a third, with equal tenacity, followed Carlos. And finally, when, later on in the afternoon, Jack set off to walk down to the wharf in order to go back aboard the yacht, he suddenly found himself accosted by a swarthy, unkempt individual, picturesquely attired in rags, yet whose manner was somehow out of keeping with his appearance.

"*Pardon, Señor*" exclaimed the fellow in Spanish, with an air of mystery, as he took off his sombrero with a flourish, "but have I the supreme honour of addressing the noble Englishman who owns the beautiful yacht that came in yesterday?"

"If you refer to the English yacht *Thetis*," said Jack, "yes, I am the owner of her."

"*Mil gracias, Señor*, for your condescension," answered the man. "Señor," he continued, "I have a very great favour to beg of you. It has been said that the Señor is about to visit Cuba. Is this so?"

The mention of Cuba instantly put Jack on his guard: he at once suspected that he was face to face with another Spanish spy, and felt curious to know what the fellow was driving at. Yet he was careful to conceal the fact that his suspicions had been aroused; he therefore answered, with an air of carelessness:

"Indeed! That is curious, for I am not aware that I have thus far mentioned my intentions to anyone ashore here. And, as to visiting Cuba—well, I am not at all certain that I shall do so; for, from what I have gathered to-day, I am led to understand that the country is in a very disturbed condition, and that it is scarcely safe for strangers to go there at present. But you have not yet mentioned the favour that you wish to ask me. Has it anything to do with my supposed intention to visit Cuba?"

"Assuredly it has, Señor; most intimately," answered the other. "Señor," and the speaker assumed a yet more furtive and mysterious manner, "I am a Cuban—and a patriot; I am destitute, as my appearance doubtless testifies, and I am most anxious to return to my country and take up arms against the oppressor. The English, enjoying liberty themselves, are reputed to be in sympathy with us Cubans in our endeavours to throw off the hated yoke of a foreign oppressor; and I have ventured to hope that the Señor would be magnanimous enough to give me a passage across to Havana in his beautiful yacht."

"I think," said Jack, with an air of hauteur, "that you have altogether mistaken the character of my vessel. She is not a passenger ship, but a private yacht in which I am taking a cruise for the benefit of my health; and it is not my custom to give passages to total strangers, especially when by so doing I should run the risk of embroiling myself with the Spanish authorities, with whom I have no quarrel. No, Señor, you must pardon my seeming churlishness in refusing so apparently trivial a favour, but I decline to associate myself in any way with the quarrel between your country and Spain. I have the honour to bid you good-day."

"Ah, pardon, Señor; just one moment!" persisted the man. "The noble Señor disclaims any intention to associate himself with the quarrel between Cuba and Spain; yet two well-known Cuban patriots are guests on board his yacht!"

"It would almost appear that my yacht and I are attracting a quite unusual amount of attention here," laughed Jack. "The gentlemen of whom you speak are personal friends of mine—the younger of them, indeed, went to the same school as myself, in England—which should be sufficient to account for my intimacy with them. But it does not follow that, because they happen to be friends of mine, I am to give a free passage to Cuba to anyone who chooses to ask me. Were I to do so I should probably have to carry across half the inhabitants of Key West! No, Señor, I must beg to be excused."

And, bowing profoundly to his ragged interlocutor—for with the language Jack always found himself falling into the stately mannerisms of the Spaniard—the young man passed on, wondering whether he had indeed been guilty of an ungracious act to a genuine Cuban patriot, or whether the man whom he had just left was a Spanish spy.

He put the question to Don Hermoso that night over the dinner-table, while relating to his companions the incident of the afternoon; but the Don laughed heartily at Jack's qualms of conscience.

"Never trouble yourself for a moment on that score, my dear Jack," said he. "The man was without doubt a Spanish spy. Had he been a genuine Cuban patriot, as he represented himself to be, he would have known that it would only have been necessary to present himself to the local agent of the Junta, with the proofs of his identity, when he could easily have obtained a passage across to Cuba. But the incident is only one more proof, if such were needed, that our party and the yacht have somehow incurred the very gravest suspicion of the Spaniards, and that we are being most jealously watched. I fear that Carlos and I are chiefly responsible for this; indeed, the agent here did not scruple to say that we—Carlos and I—committed a very great tactical blunder in coming out here in the yacht. He asserts that we ought to have come out in the ordinary way by mail steamer, and that in such a case little or no suspicion would have attached to the yacht; but that certain news transmitted from Europe, coupled with the fact of our presence on board, has convinced the authorities that the yacht is in these waters for the purpose of running a cargo of contraband into the island. Of course we have our spies, as the Spaniards have theirs, and one of our most trusty investigators reported to-day, while I was with the agent, that it is undoubtedly the intention of the Spanish authorities that their torpedo boat shall accompany the *Thetis*, so long as she remains in Cuban waters."

"Phew! that sounds awkward," remarked Milsom. "Does anybody know what her speed is?"

Nobody did, it appeared; whereupon Milsom undertook to ascertain whether the custom-house officer possessed the knowledge, and, if so, to extract it from him. Accordingly, when, a little later, the saloon party adjourned to the deck for the enjoyment of their post-prandial cigars, the skipper sauntered away forward and up on the top of the deck-house, where Perkins and the officer were sitting yarning together, and joined them. He sat chatting with them for nearly an hour, and then, upon the pretext that he had forgotten to speak to Mr Singleton about the arrangements for coaling the ship, rose and joined the trio who were sitting aft near the stern grating.

"Well," said Jack, "have you been able to learn anything, Phil?"

"Yes," answered Milsom; "and what I have learned is not very comforting. That torpedo boat, it appears, is practically a new craft, and she has a sea speed of twenty-five knots, which is one knot better than our best; so how we are going to dodge her is more than I at present know. The three gunboats we need not trouble about, for the two-masted craft are only capable of sixteen knots, while the three-masted boat—the *Destructor*—can do about seventeen, at a pinch, though she is said to have been at one time capable of twenty-two and a half. Neither need we trouble about the cruisers, for the faster of them—the *Lepanto*—is only capable of twenty and a half knots when she is clean, and I am told that at present she is dreadfully foul."

"Still, it appears to me that the torpedo boat is, apart from the rest, more than we shall be able to manage," remarked Don Hermoso. "If she persists in dogging our heels we shall not have a ghost of a chance of landing our cargo anywhere."

"No," said Jack. "But she will not dog our heels, Don Hermoso; don't you trouble. This is where my submarine comes in, and is going to score, if I am not mistaken. Macintyre and I will be able to doctor that torpedo boat so that she will not trouble us. We will just go down in the submarine and remove the nut that secures her propeller to its shaft, and when she begins to move, her propeller will drop off; and before it can be replaced we will have our cargo ashore, and be in a position to laugh at her."

"But how will you manage that, Jack, in the presence of all these ships?" demanded Milsom. "You could not possibly do what you suggest without being seen. Besides, there is the custom-house officer to be reckoned with; and I really do not believe that the man is to be trusted with your secret."

"We shall have to do the job at night-time—the night before we leave here for Cuba," said Jack. "And, as to the custom-house officer, we must trust that he will sleep too soundly to hear anything."

"Leave him to me," said Don Hermoso. "I am a bit of a chemist, in my way, and I will concoct a liquid a few drops of which in his grog the last thing at night will cause him to sleep soundly all night, and awake none the worse in the morning."

"That will get us over one difficulty," said Jack, "and I have just thought of a plan that will get us over another—that of getting the submarine into the water unobserved. It strikes me that we can do all that is necessary without using the submarine at all. That torpedo boat is, as you may observe, lying quite close to the shore, so close, indeed, that there cannot be much more than two feet of water under her keel. Consequently Macintyre and I have only to don our special diving dresses—which, as I think I have explained to you, need no air-pipe or anything of that sort—go down over the side of the yacht, and make our way to our prey under water. With a little management we could even do the trick in broad daylight, and nobody be any the wiser!"

"Excellent!" exclaimed Milsom enthusiastically. "We will have the lighters alongside to coal us to-morrow; and before they come along we will hang tarpaulins all round the ship to keep the paint clean. Then, while everybody is busy coaling, you and Macintyre can watch your opportunity and slip over the side through the ash port. Gad! won't those fellows be wrathful when their propeller parts company! They will no doubt suspect us, but they cannot possibly prove anything."

On the following morning, immediately after breakfast, Milsom went ashore and made arrangements for the immediate coaling of the yacht; and while he was absent, Jack and Macintyre, the chief engineer, got out the diving dresses and thoroughly overhauled them, charged the air cylinders with densely-compressed air, and collected such tools as they expected to require for their job. By the time that this had been done, Milsom was back aboard the yacht, having made all his arrangements, including one which was of considerable assistance to Jack and Macintyre. This consisted of an arrangement to take the yacht directly alongside the coal hulk, instead of coaling from lighters, and the advantage to the conspirators arose from the fact that the particular hulk from which the *Thetis* was to coal lay within a short hundred yards of the spot where the Spanish torpedo boat rode at anchor. Then a number of

tarpaulins were got up on deck and hung over the ship's sides, fore and aft, covering the hull from the bulwark rail right down to the surface of the water, to protect the white paint from defilement by flying coal dust; and, this having been done, the yacht was taken alongside the coal hulk, and the process of coaling the vessel at once began under the joint supervision of Milsom and the second engineer, the skipper being especially particular in the arranging of the fenders between the hulls of the two craft. So fastidiously careful was he, indeed, in this matter, that he finally caused two booms to be rigged out, one forward and one aft, to bear the yacht off from the side of the hulk, with the result that there was a clear space of fully two feet between the sides of the two craft. And, to facilitate as much as possible the process of coaling, Milsom caused a broad gangway, nearly six feet wide, to be rigged between the two vessels, so that the porters might pass to and fro freely without obstructing each other. And, singularly enough, this gangway happened to be rigged exactly over the ash port, which was thus quite effectually concealed from the view of even the most prying eyes. And there undoubtedly were several pairs of eyes very curiously and intently watching everything that was happening aboard the English yacht, not the least intent among them being those of the custom-house officer, who planted himself upon the bridge of the *Thetis*, fully determined that nothing great or small should be passed from the yacht to the coal hulk without his full knowledge and consent. Thus, thanks to the exceeding care with which Milsom had made his dispositions, Jack—who, with the two Montijos, was supposed to be down below—and Macintyre, fully equipped in their diving dresses, and with their tools slung to their belts, had not the slightest



DISABLING THE SPANISH TORPEDO BOAT

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Frontispiece

difficulty in leaving the harbour by way of a diving ladder.

the yacht unobserved, and descending to the bottom of

The water being shallow and tolerably clear, and the sun high enough in the heavens to throw a strong light down into it, the two adventurers were able to see well enough to be able to pass from the yacht to the torpedo boat without any other guide than that of their unaided eyesight; and within ten minutes the pair found themselves beneath the bottom of their quarry, the keel of which was, as Jack had anticipated, within about three feet of the ground. The boat, they found, was driven by a single propeller protected by a skeleton frame forming the boat's keel and sternpost, and to climb into this frame occupied Macintyre less than a minute, helped as he was by Jack. Macintyre's first act was to subject the propeller nut to a very careful examination, after which he fixed a big spanner in position and threw his whole weight upon it, assisted by Jack, who was pulling at a rope attached to the extreme end of the spanner handle. The nut, however, was rusted on so effectually as to be immovable, so Macintyre climbed down and, by means of a slate and a piece of chalk, consulted Jack as to what was best to be done to overcome the difficulty. Looking up, and studying the structure of the boat's stern intently, Jack saw that by steadying themselves by the rudder chains they could both climb up and stand upon the arm of the spanner, when, by bracing their shoulders against the boat's overhanging stern, they could bring the whole of their united strength to bear, and thus possibly start the nut. By means of a diagram and a few words chalked upon the slate Macintyre was soon made to comprehend what Jack meant, and then they both climbed up and, with considerable difficulty, arranged themselves in the required position. Then, bracing their shoulders against the vessel's hull, the two men thrust with all their might, with the result that the nut suddenly started, and the spanner fell off, dropping to the bottom of the harbour and leaving the two operators hanging by the rudder chains. The drop from thence to the sand, however, was not above six feet—a mere trifle in water—so they let go, recovered the spanner, and got to work again. Once started, the nut gave them very little further difficulty, and ten minutes later it was off and safely buried out of sight in the sand. The propeller, however, still remained on the shaft, and might quite possibly continue to remain there for a time, even should the boat get under way; but the moment that she stopped her engines after once getting under way, or if she should happen to attempt to go astern, the propeller would at once slip off and be lost. Three-quarters of an hour from the moment of leaving the yacht, Jack and Macintyre were safely on board her again, with their task accomplished, much to the satisfaction of the party.

It was well on toward lunch-time ere the yacht's bunkers were full and she was able to haul off from the coal hulk, and the greater part of the afternoon was occupied by the crew in washing down the decks and paint work, cleaning

up generally, polishing brasswork, and restoring the little vessel to her normal state of immaculate neatness; during which Jack and the two Montijos took a final run ashore, for it had been decided that, failing the occurrence of anything to cause an alteration of their plans, they would leave for Cuba on the following day.

No attempt was made to preserve secrecy as to the yacht's movements; nor, on the other hand, were the preparations for her departure ostentatiously displayed. Soon after eight o'clock in the morning a thin film of smoke was seen to issue from the vessel's funnel, gradually increasing in density, and it became quite apparent to all who chose to interest themselves in the matter that the *Thetis* was getting up steam in readiness to take her departure. And that she intended to leave almost immediately was further indicated by the arrival alongside her of a boat containing fresh water, and other boats containing fresh meat, vegetables, fruit, and supplies generally. But there were no signs of hurry on board the vessel: everything was done openly and leisurely, as is the way of people who are taking their pleasure; and it was not until nearly five o'clock in the afternoon that the boats were hoisted to the davits, and a thin jet of steam spouting from the bows of the vessel proclaimed that her crew were getting her anchor. And when at length Perkins, the chief mate, standing in the bows of the vessel, vociferously announced that the anchor was aweigh, there was no sign of haste or anxiety in the slow, leisurely movement of the yacht as she swept round in a wide circle from the spot where she had lain at anchor, and headed seaward by way of the West Channel, dipping her ensign to the men-o'-war in the roadstead as she went, while her crew catted and fished the anchor on its appearance above the surface. Then, and not until then, did the *Thetis* quicken, until she was running at a speed of about fourteen knots.

The yacht had been under way about half an hour when Jack, who with the two Montijos and Milsom was on the top of the deck-house, diligently watching the roadstead which they had just left, exclaimed: "Here she comes!" and the Spanish torpedo boat was seen coming along astern, with a dense cloud of black smoke pouring from her funnels, and the water playing like a fountain about her sharp stem as she swept after the *Thetis* at full speed. Milsom looked at her long and earnestly through his binoculars; then he turned to Jack and, with a frown wrinkling his brow, said:

"By the look of that boat, and the pace at which she is coming through the water, it appears to me, young man, that something has gone very seriously wrong with the little job that you undertook to do yesterday. Are you quite sure that you removed the nut?"

"Absolutely certain," answered Jack cheerfully.

"Then how do you account for the fact that she has not yet dropped her propeller?" demanded Milsom.

"Easily enough," answered Jack. "She got under way, like ourselves, by steaming ahead and sweeping round in a wide circle. So long as her engines continue to turn ahead, her propeller will probably retain its position on the shaft, kept there by the pressure of the water on its blades; but the moment that she eases down, it will probably drop off, or, if not then, it certainly will at the instant when her engines are stopped. Don't be alarmed, Phil; you have only to cause her to stop her engines, and you will see what will happen."

"Then," said Milsom, as he laid his hand upon the bridge telegraph and signalled "Full speed ahead", "we will entice her a bit farther out to sea before we do anything more. If she runs out of sight of the anchorage before breaking down we shall get a nice little start, and shall probably not be interfered with for the rest of the trip. Ah, there is the edge of the bank ahead of us!" as a line of demarcation between the pale, greenish-blue water over the reef and the deep-blue water beyond it became visible. "Let her go off to due south," to the quartermaster at the wheel; "we'll try to persuade them that we are bound for Havana!"

"A stern chase is a long chase", especially when one craft has five or six miles start of the other, and the pursuing craft has only a single knot's—or perhaps not quite so much as that—advantage in speed; it was consequently not until the brief dusk was deepening into darkness, and the great mellow stars were leaping into view in the rapidly deepening azure of the sky, that, the *Thetis* being by that time about midway between Key West and Havana, Milsom rang down to the engine-room for half speed, and allowed the torpedo boat to range up abreast of the yacht. This she did at a distance of about a quarter of a mile, without making any attempt to speak to or interfere with the English vessel, merely slowing down to regulate her pace to that of the yacht. Then Milsom spoke down through the voice tube, ordering the engines to be first stopped, and then to go slowly, but at a gradually increasing speed, astern, by which means he quite expected to induce the commander of the torpedo boat to stop. The result was everything that could have been desired, for as soon as the Spaniard realised that he was running ahead of the yacht in the most unaccountable way, he stopped his engines and waited patiently for the other vessel to overtake him, his propeller doubtless slipping off the tail-shaft and going to the bottom at the instant of the stopping of the engines. But while the torpedo boat, deprived of the drag of her propeller, continued to forge strongly ahead under the impetus of her own momentum, the *Thetis* was even more rapidly widening the distance between herself and the torpedo boat by going full speed astern, until, when the two craft were separated by some three miles of heaving water, the perplexed and astounded Spanish lieutenant, still ignorant of what had happened, made up his mind to go back to see what the English ship was about, and, ordering his helm to be put hard over, rang down to his engine-room for "full speed ahead". Then the furious racing of his engines, as steam was admitted into the cylinders, revealed the ghastly truth that he had lost his propeller and was absolutely helpless, with the nearest land fully forty miles away. He rushed from the bridge down into the tiny engine-room, to consult with and explosively reprimand the engineers for permitting such a mishap to occur; and at length, when his vexation had worked itself off, returned to the deck and gave orders for signals of distress to be made, by means of rockets, to the English yacht. But by that time the *Thetis* had vanished in the darkness; nor did she re-appear, although the unfortunate lieutenant expended his entire stock of rockets in a vain attempt to attract her attention.

Chapter Five.

His Spanish Majesty's gunboat Tiburon.

Meanwhile the saloon party on board the *Thetis*, having comfortably bestowed themselves in capacious basket chairs under the awning on the top of the deck-house when the yacht got under way, watched with mingled interest and amusement the strenuous pursuit of their own vessel by the Spanish torpedo boat; and when at length Milsom gave the order for the yacht's engines to be first stopped and then sent astern, they with one accord rose to their feet and brought their glasses to bear upon the torpedo boat, intent upon seeing what would next happen. For although darkness had by this time fallen, the night was beautifully fine and clear, and the mellow lustre of the innumerable stars shed a soft light upon the scene that enabled the watchers, with the aid of their powerful night glasses, to perceive with very tolerable distinctness whatever might happen within so short a distance as a quarter of a mile, or even twice as far. Presently Jack spoke.

"She has stopped, I think," he said; "at all events I can no longer distinguish the phosphorescent wake made by her propeller; and if that is the case we shall have no more trouble from her. Of course it would have been easy enough for us to have made this pursuit impossible, by removing her propeller when we were working at it yesterday; but the thought occurred to me that, had we done so, the removal might have been discovered, and in that case it is quite possible that suspicion, even though of a very vague and doubtful character, might have fastened upon us, with the result that at some future time, when it may be vitally important for us to repeat the trick, such precautions might be taken as would render its repetition impossible. As it is, the craft has been under steam for a couple of hours, during which, to all appearance, nothing was wrong with her. I do not think, therefore, that anyone is in the least likely to connect us with the mishap."

"No," agreed Milsom, "the thing was most excellently done, Jack, it could not possibly have been better managed; and the mishap will wear the aspect of an ordinary accident of the sea. You have a longer head upon you than I can boast, my lad; I should never have thought as far ahead as you did. But I think we are far enough away from that boat now to allow of our resuming our voyage." And he signalled to the engine-room, first to "Stop", and then to go "Full speed ahead."

"Port your helm, Quartermaster," he said to the helmsman, "until she heads due north, and then give her a very small touch of starboard helm—just enough to enable us to make a wide circle round that torpedo boat out yonder—until her head works round to south-west by west, when you can steady her at that. That course," he explained to his companions, "ought to run us within sight of the light on Jutias about three bells in the middle watch."

"And when do you suppose we shall reach our destination, Captain?" asked Don Hermoso.

"The Laguna de Cortes? Oh! about breakfast-time to-morrow morning, if we keep the boat running at full speed, and do not meet with any interruption on the way," answered Milsom.

"Hillo!" exclaimed Jack; "see that rocket, Phil? It looks as though it might have been sent up by the torpedo boat. She will be somewhere out in that direction, won't she?"

"Ay, there or thereabout," answered Milsom, glancing into the compass bowl to get the bearing of the rocket. "That means that they've just discovered the loss of their propeller, and are in trouble about it."

"I hope that the crew of the boat are in no danger," exclaimed Don Hermoso anxiously. "I have no wish that they should come to harm—"

"No need to worry yourself about that, Señor," answered Milsom. "The weather is fine, and the boat, no doubt, sound enough. The worst that is likely to happen to them is that they will have to stay where they are until something comes along and tows them into Havana."

At this moment the dinner gong sounded, and the little party retired below.

When Jack went up on deck next morning, as the ship's bell was striking eight, he saw that the yacht was running along, with her head to the eastward, within about half a mile of some low land, dotted with trees, which stretched ahead and astern of her for several miles on their port hand, terminating at each extremity in a low headland. Inland, at a distance of about twenty-five miles, rose a long range of hills, or low mountains, which appeared to rise to a height of something between two thousand and three thousand feet.

"Good-morning, Jack!" cheerily exclaimed the skipper, as Singleton ran up the ladder on to the top of the deck-house. "Glorious morning, isn't it? But it is going to be roasting hot a little later on; the sun has a sting already, in spite of this piping easterly breeze."

"Yes," agreed Jack. "And if it is hot here, what must it be ashore? But where are we now, Skipper?"

"Pretty close to our destination, I'm thankful to say," answered Milsom. "That point astern is Cape Corrientes, the point ahead is Mangle Point, four miles beyond which is Cape Frances, where we shall run in upon the Bank, or shoal, which extends eastward for something like one hundred and sixty miles to the end of the Jardinillos. Those hills, inland there, are called the Organ Mountains; though, to my mind, the name is much too grandiloquent for such insignificant elevations. I hope that pilot chap who is to take us into the lagoon will be keeping a bright lookout for us; I have just been having a squint at the chart, and I tell you, Jack, that I don't half like the idea of taking this little beauty in over that precious Bank, where it would be the easiest thing in the world to rip the bottom out of her on some unsuspected upstanding coral snag. I mean to go dead slow all the while that we are on that Bank, I can tell you, although I happen to know the greater part of it as well as I know my own back garden. And it is perhaps because I know it so well that I like it so little. Ah!"—as the yacht swung round the point which she had been approaching, and opened out for another about four miles farther on—"there is Cape Frances; and there is the Bank showing up plainly enough. That is it, where the colour of the water changes from dark blue to almost white. And now it is time for us to hoist the signal by which the pilot is to identify us. Mr Perkins, have the goodness to bend on Y and run it up to the fore truck, if you please."

A minute later, Don Hermoso and Carlos made their appearance on the top of the deck-house, just as Y—a rectangular flag composed of red and yellow diagonal stripes—went soaring up to the fore-mast-head.

“Good-morning, Jack! good-morning, Captain!” said Don Hermoso. “Is that red-and-yellow flag the prearranged signal agreed upon for our identification by the pilot and the people on shore?”

“It is, Señor,” answered Milsom. “There is Cape Frances, on our port bow—no doubt you recognise it—and if your pilot is keeping a proper lookout, he ought to spot us immediately upon our rounding that point.”

“And no doubt he will, Captain,” returned Don Hermoso. “So that is Cape Frances? No, I do not recognise it, Señor, for I have never before passed it at sea. And those are the Sierras de los Organos yonder, and the Sierras del Rosario farther on to the right. I recognise them, of course. And—yes, surely—just to the right of that isolated peak I can see what must certainly be the town of Pinar del Rio! We are not far from home now, Carlos, and if all goes well with us to-day we ought to-night to sleep in our own casa, and see dear little Isolda once more. The child will rejoice to have us with her again.”

“Yes,” said Carlos, “and I shall not only rejoice to see her again, but to know that you are once more on the spot to look after her. In her last letter to me, received at Key West, she mentioned that Don Sebastian Alvaros has been a most persistent visitor to the house ever since we left Cuba, and I have my doubts of that man. I did not mention the matter to you when I received the letter, as I did not wish to make you feel uneasy; but now that we may hope to be at home to-night I think it only right that you should know.”

“Ah!” remarked Don Hermoso; “I will see that Don Sebastian’s visits are discouraged henceforth. It is true that I know nothing against him—indeed, he is spoken of as a very promising officer—still, like yourself, Carlos, I do not altogether trust him; he is not precisely a desirable acquaintance, and I will endeavour to make him understand that he is not wanted at the hacienda.”

At this moment the *Thetis* passed Cape Frances and opened out into the Bay of Cortes.

“There is our destination, gentlemen,” said Milsom, pointing to a projecting bluff some eight or nine miles up the coast. “That bluff is Piedras Point; and beyond it is the Laguna de Cortes—or the Pirates’ Lagoon as some people call it. And here we are at the edge of the Bank; from this point onward I intend to proceed very cautiously indeed.”

So saying, he laid his hand upon the handle of the engine-room telegraph and rang down for “Half speed”, calling down the voice tube a moment later for the engines to be run dead slow. And as the yacht slowed up she passed from the dark blue of the deep water to the pale, whitish blue of the shallow water that covers the immense coral reef known locally as The Bank.

“Mr Perkins,” shouted Milsom, “I must have a man as lookout at the foremast-head, if you please. You had better bend a boatswain’s chair on to the gaff-topsail halyards, and send him up in that, as I shall require him to stay there until we are safely at anchor. And when you have done that, rouse your cable on deck, and see everything ready for letting go. Jack, I can spare eyes for nothing but the ship just now, so oblige me, will you, by taking the glasses, and say whether you can see anything in the shape of a boat coming toward us with a flag flying. And, between whiles, you may just look carefully along the coast to see if you can spot a guarda-costa hovering about. We don’t want to be caught napping in the act of landing this stuff.”

Jack took the glasses out of their case and swept the whole of the visible coast, but for some time without result; there was nothing under either sail or steam to be seen in any direction. At length, however, when the yacht had arrived within about two miles of Piedras Point, a small pirogue under sail suddenly shot out from behind the point, heading to the southward close-hauled; she carried a sprit-mainsail and a jib, and at the top end of the sprit there fluttered a diminutive replica of the red-and-yellow flag which was flying from the fore truck of the yacht.

“Ah!” exclaimed Jack, as he brought his glasses to bear upon the boat; “here comes your pilot, Phil, at last, and he is flying the ‘all right’ signal, so I suppose we may take it for granted that the coast is clear.”

“Yes, I see him,” answered Milsom. “Keep her away a couple of points, Quartermaster, and give that boat a chance to fetch us. She is coming alongside. Masthead there. Keep a very bright lookout, my man, for sunken rocks; there are plenty of them to be found here if they are looked for.”

“Ay, ay, sir!” answered the man. “We have passed a few already; but I didn’t say anything, because we weren’t headin’ so as to hit ‘em.”

Ten minutes later the pirogue was close at hand, and Milsom rang down the signal to “Stop”. The pirogue was a very quaint-looking craft, of about twenty feet in length by some five feet beam, formed out of a solid log of wood which had been roughly trimmed with an axe to form the bottom portion of her, with a couple of planks above to form her top sides. Although the trade wind was blowing quite fresh, this queer-looking craft carried no ballast, properly so-called; but to prevent her from capsizing a couple of negroes stood on her weather gunwale, holding on to ropes attached to her masthead, and leaning back almost horizontally out over the water. A third negro, attired in a picturesquely dirty shirt, and trousers rolled up above his knees, and with a most shockingly dilapidated straw hat on his head, steered the little craft by means of a broad-bladed paddle laid out over the lee quarter. Primitive, however, as the craft was in appearance, she came through the water at a most astonishing rate, and presently shot up alongside under the lee of the yacht, the two negroes who acted as ballast smartly recovering themselves and springing inboard as she did so. A rope’s end was thrown down into her, and the picturesque individual who had been steering her nimbly climbed up the side of the yacht and stepped on deck, where he was met by Don Hermoso.

“Buenos dias, Señor!” exclaimed the fellow, doffing his ragged head-covering with the flourish and grace of a grandee. “Cuba is ready!” (This was the password that was to prove the *bona fides* of the man.)

"And we also are ready," answered Don Hermoso. "Is the coast clear?"

"Quite clear, Señor," answered the man, who, by the way, was a turtle fisher, inhabiting a hut on one of the small cays that stretched across the entrance of the lagoon which the yacht was approaching. "A gunboat has been cruising about the bay of late, but she steamed away yesterday morning, after communicating with the shore, and we have seen nothing of her since."

"Then we had better proceed forthwith, and get our work over whilst the opportunity is favourable," remarked Don Hermoso. "What is your name, by the by?"

"Pedro, Señor—Pedro Velasquez," answered the man.

"Good!" said Don Hermoso. "Follow me up to the bridge, Pedro."

"This is our pilot, Captain," he continued, introducing the negro to Milsom, who looked at him quizzically and responded to his bow by somewhat curtly bidding him "Good-morning!"

"He says that the coast is clear, so we may as well proceed forthwith. How do we steer, Pedro?"

"Keep an offing of a mile, to allow of room for turning, and to get a straight run in. For the present we may head for that white building on the hillside yonder," answered Pedro.

This being clear to Milsom, the latter touched the telegraph, and the yacht proceeded, with the pirogue astern in tow. Presently three small cays detached themselves from the mainland, revealing a fine spacious expanse of land-locked water behind them; and when, a little later, the *Thetis* had brought the largest cay fair abeam, the pilot waved his hand, the helm was put hard a-starboard, and the vessel's bows were pointed straight for the channel between the northernmost cay and the mainland.

"We must enter the channel very slowly, Señor," cautioned Pedro, "for the navigation of it is rather awkward, and I doubt whether a vessel of this size has ever before been taken into the lagoon."

With her engines going dead slow, and occasionally stopping altogether to deaden her way, the yacht crept cautiously along until, having passed the critical danger-spot, she slid into the lagoon, which was now seen to be a sheet of water some four miles long by about two miles broad, trending due north and south, with a creek in its north-west corner, toward which the bows of the vessel were turned, the speed being quickened up to about eight knots. Ten minutes later the pilot gave the word to be ready to anchor; the engines were stopped and then sent astern, and a minute afterwards, the yacht having been brought to a standstill, the anchor was let go, and the voyagers found themselves riding in a fine, snug harbour, absolutely safe in all weathers, and perfectly screened from the view of anything and everything that might chance to pass outside.

No sooner was the anchor down than the creek abreast which the yacht was moored began to swarm with boats of all shapes and sizes, which came hurrying out to receive and transfer to the shore the cases of arms, ammunition, dynamite, lead, and supplies of all kinds which lay snugly stowed away beneath the floors of the ship's saloons; while the entire strength of the yacht's crew was employed upon the task of breaking out the packages and conveying them on deck. The boats' crews were all coloured men, and mostly negroes; but in the leading boat there came a mulatto bearing a letter from Rabi, the then leader of the insurgents, to Don Hermoso, authorising the bearer, one José Seguin, to receive the contraband, which was now passed down into the boats with all possible speed, as a rumour had reached the place that a strong body of Spanish troops was in the neighbourhood, and might make its appearance at any moment. It did not turn up, however, and by two o'clock in the afternoon every scrap of incriminating material was out of the yacht and on its way to the headquarters of the insurgents, somewhere up in the Organ Mountains. Every scrap, that is to say, except the four 12-pound quick-firers and the two Maxims, with their store of ammunition, which constituted the armament of the yacht. These weapons had not thus far been mounted, it having been deemed inadvisable to make so unusual a display as that of an armed yacht in the harbour of Key West, lest undue attention should be attracted to the vessel, and inconvenient questions asked. But now, by Milsom's advice, they got the weapons up and mounted them, so that, in the event of the vessel being searched by the Spanish authorities, there should be nothing in the nature of concealed weapons on board to afford an excuse for the making of trouble. Thus, by the end of the afternoon watch the yacht was again spruce and clean as a new pin, and made a very brave show with her brand-new, silver-bright guns grinning threateningly out over the rail, and the two Maxims all ready for action on the top of the deck-house. Her appearance said, as plainly as words: "Touch me who dares!" yet her armament was not boisterously aggressive, considering that her presumptive owner had set out from England with no very settled programme, but the possibility that ere he returned he might be moved to visit spots where, despite the rapid spread of civilisation, might is still right.

The hurry and confusion incidental to the landing of the yacht's cargo of contraband had been so great that any such orderly meal as the usual luncheon had been out of the question, and everybody had eaten and drunk as they worked, snatching a mouthful or a gulp when they could; the little saloon party were consequently now gathered on the top of the deck-house, getting an early afternoon tea, while the anchor was being hove up by means of the steam windlass, prior to the vessel proceeding to sea again. Don Hermoso had been congratulating himself and everybody else upon the ease and complete success with which the yacht's primary mission had been accomplished, and had also expressed himself very nicely as to the magnitude of his obligation to Jack and Milsom for the invaluable assistance which they had rendered, without which, the Don declared, the adventure could never have been brought to a successful issue. "And now, my dear Jack," he continued, "I have two further favours to ask you. The first is that you will have the goodness to land Carlos and myself as soon as may be at Calonna—which is about twenty-two miles to the eastward of this—in order that we may take the train thence to Pinar del Rio, in time, perhaps, to reach home to-night; and the second is, that you will favour us with your company for as long a time as you may be disposed to stay. Then, having landed us, Captain Milsom can take the yacht round to Havana, when, if the island proves to be

sufficiently quiet to allow of the vessel being left in Perkins's charge, we shall feel happy if he also"—with a bow to Milsom—"will honour our poor house with his presence for a time, until, indeed, the yacht is again required for service."

Jack accepted the invitation promptly and unhesitatingly: Carlos and he were old chums, and indeed almost like brothers; while as for Don Hermoso, Jack had seen enough of him during the voyage out to have contracted for him a feeling of the highest regard and esteem. He knew that the invitation was as earnest and cordial as words could make it; and the conversations that had been engaged in from time to time on board the yacht had caused him to become profoundly interested in Cuba, and filled him with an intense desire to see the island, and, if possible, be an eye-witness of its struggle for liberty. Milsom, on the other hand, while perhaps as keen as Jack to see all that there was to be seen, was, above and before all things else, a sailor; his acceptance of Don Hermoso's invitation, therefore, was qualified by sundry conditions, every one of which had reference to the question of the safety of the yacht.

By the time that the conversation had reached this point the anchor was a-trip, and Milsom went to the engine-room telegraph, while the quartermaster climbed up to the bridge and stationed himself at the wheel. Velasquez was no longer on board, Milsom having informed him that he could now dispense with his services—for it was one of Lieutenant Philip Milsom's characteristics that when he had once witnessed the navigation of any particular passage he could at any time thereafter perform the same feat of navigation himself; he therefore now took sole charge of the yacht and skilfully navigated her out of the lagoon and into the open sea, setting the course for Calonna, after which he again calmly seated himself at the table and asked for another cup of tea.

The yacht, running at about eleven knots, had accomplished a little more than half the distance between the lagoon and Calonna when smoke was seen ahead, and a few minutes later a steamer was made out coming toward them. There was nothing alarming in this, of course, for small coasting steamers are constantly plying between the various ports along the coast of Cuba: but it was not long ere it became apparent, from the rig of the approaching craft—which was that of a three-masted schooner—that she was a Government vessel, probably a gunboat; and Milsom made no secret of his relief at the fact that everything of a compromising nature had been safely got out of the *Thetis*. Any doubt that might have existed as to the character of the stranger was soon dispelled; for when she arrived within about a mile of the *Thetis* she hoisted the Spanish naval ensign at her mizen peak and, slowing down, rounded-to athwart the yacht's course, at the same time hoisting the international signal, "Heave-to; I am sending a boat!"

"What is the proper thing to do, Phil?" demanded Jack, when Milsom read out the interpretation of the signal. "He has no right to stop us, has he?"

"Certainly not," answered Milsom. "If he suspects us of an intention to smuggle he may follow and watch us, of course; but to stop us in this high-handed fashion is coming it rather too strong. He knows that we are an English yacht, for there are our ensign and burgee to bear witness to the fact. Nevertheless, since we have happily got rid of everything of a compromising nature, we may as well heave-to and allow him to board us, when you, Jack, in your character as owner, may make as much fuss as you please—the more the better—and threaten to report him, also to complain to your Government of the insult and outrage to which he has subjected you. In short, 'bluff' him for all that you're worth."

"All right!" said Jack, "I will. When—"

His further remarks were cut short by the flash of a gun and a jet of smoke spouting from the bows of the gunboat; and the next instant a twenty-four-pound round shot came ricocheting toward the yacht, missing her by only about a dozen yards!

"Confound the fellow's impudence!" exclaimed Milsom, as he dashed at the bridge telegraph and signalled to stop the engines. "It would rightly serve him if we were to return his fire. But perhaps the wisest plan and the most dignified will be to stop and let him come aboard. But give it him hot for firing upon the British flag. Make him sit up! I only wish that I could jabber Spanish as fluently as you do; I'd scare him out of his skin!"

As the yacht, with the way that she had on her, gradually drifted down toward the gunboat, it was seen that the latter was preparing to lower a boat; and presently a gig, manned by six oarsmen and a coxswain, was hauled up to her gangway, down the ladder of which an officer in lieutenant's uniform presently descended, stepping into the boat, which then pushed off and headed toward the *Thetis*. Meanwhile, Milsom having said a few hasty words to Perkins, the yacht's gangway had been thrown open and her accommodation ladder lowered, and when presently the Spanish boat dashed alongside and hooked on, Jack and Milsom were standing just inside the gangway, waiting to receive the officer. He was a rather good-looking man, somewhere about thirty years of age, and as he sprang up the ladder and in on deck he touched the peak of his uniform cap by way of salute: and Milsom saw his eyebrows go up as his eyes fell upon the two quick-firers that graced the yacht's after deck.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" he said, in almost perfect English; "what ship is this?"

"Leave him to me, Jack," whispered Milsom, upon discovering the welcome fact that he could make himself understood; and without waiting for Jack's consent he stepped forward and answered:

"This is the English yacht *Thetis*, of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, as you may see by looking at that ensign. And what ship is that, sir; and what does the captain of her mean by firing upon us?"

"That ship, Señor, is His Spanish Majesty's gunboat *Tiburón*, sent out especially to look for your vessel," answered the officer. "My Government has received positive intelligence from a reliable source that you have on board a large consignment of arms and ammunition destined for the use of the Cuban insurgents; and our instructions are to seize



MILSOM PUT A WHISTLE TO HIS LIPS

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your vessel and take her into Havana. We fired upon you because you were somewhat slow in obeying our summons to stop."

"Oh!" said Milsom, "so that is how matters stand, is it? And do you suppose, sir, that Great Britain will allow her flag to be fired on without having something to say about it?"

"Great Britain will scarcely be willing to protect a vessel which, under the shelter of her flag, is engaged in succouring those who are rebelling against the rule of a friendly nation!" remarked the officer. "And, in any case, we are prepared to take the consequences of our acts. We know this so-called yacht to be a smuggler of contraband of war, and we intend to seize her."

"What if I were to tell you that we have not an ounce of contraband of war on board?" enquired Milsom.

"My captain would simply not believe you, Señor," answered the Spaniard. "You will therefore be pleased to regard this vessel as a prize, and yourselves as prisoners!" and he stepped quickly to the gangway and called to the armed crew of the boat to come out of her. As he did so, Milsom put a whistle to his lips and blew a short, shrill blast. There instantly followed a rush of bare feet along the deck; and as the Spaniards passed in through the yacht's gangway they found themselves confronted with some thirty stalwart British seamen, with drawn cutlasses in their hands and revolvers in their belts.

"Caramba! What does this mean, Señor?" demanded the Spanish lieutenant, starting back in dismay at this unexpected *dénouement*.

"It means just this, Señor Teniente," answered Milsom; "we don't intend to stand any nonsense of any description. You go back to your ship and tell your captain that, since somebody seems to have sent him out on a fool's errand, my owner here, Señor Don John Singleton, will—purely as an act of courtesy, mind you—permit him, or you, to search this ship from stem to stern and from keel to truck, in order that you may thoroughly satisfy yourselves that we have no contraband, whether of war or otherwise, on board. But there will be no seizure of this ship; understand that! Such an act would be an outrage to our flag; and, as you may see, we are both ready and willing to resist it! Also, you will please tell your captain that we demand an ample apology for his high-handed behaviour in daring to fire upon us."

"Carrajo! Señor, those are very big words; and you ought to be perfectly certain of yourself before you use them. They are offensive, sir; and a Spanish officer allows no one to use such words to him with impunity!" exclaimed the Spaniard.

"Sir," retorted Milsom, "the behaviour of your captain in firing upon this yacht was offensive; and he will find that he cannot treat Englishmen in that fashion with impunity. There is a right and a wrong way of doing these things, and your captain has chosen the wrong way; he will therefore be made to suffer for it."

"We shall see, Señor Englishman; we shall see," returned the Spaniard. "Then, am I to understand that you refuse to surrender your ship?"

"Yes, sir," answered Milsom; "that is precisely what I wish you to understand. And I wish you to understand, further, that if you dare to attempt force, I will treat you as a pirate, and sink you, despite your flag. You see that I have the means and the power to carry out my threat—" waving his hand first towards the guns and then towards his men.

"Very well, Señor," answered the Spaniard, livid with rage at being thus hectored before his own men, "I will tell my captain what you say; and it will be for him to decide how he will deal with you. If it rested with me, I would blow your ship out of the water. And I shall remember your face, Señor; and it may be that some day we shall meet on shore."

"I expect to be in Havana to-morrow, or next day, Señor Teniente, and it will afford me the greatest pleasure to meet you there," answered Milsom. "Good afternoon, and don't forget to tell your captain that if he chooses to come on board in a friendly way, my owner here will be very pleased to see him, and to show him all over the ship. He can look into every nook and cranny of her if it will afford him any satisfaction to do so."

The Spanish lieutenant bowed without speaking, signed to his men to go back into their boat, and followed them down the side. Five minutes later Jack and Milsom saw him gesticulating violently on the gunboat's quarter-deck as he related to the commander of the craft his version of the recent interview.

Chapter Six.

Commander Don Luis y Albuquerque.

"I say, Phil, you seemed to have your knife into that Spaniard," said Jack, as he and Milsom stood watching the gunboat. "You appeared to take a delight in rubbing his fur the wrong way."

"Yes," agreed Milsom meditatively, "I am afraid I did; and I am afraid, too, that I went just a little farther than there was any strict need for. But then the beggars put my back up, to start with, by firing at us. Had they contented themselves with pitching a shot across our fore-foot, I would not have minded so much; but they fired to hit—if they could. Then that lieutenant must needs come swaggering aboard here, putting on side, and threatening us—actually threatening us—with arrest, and imprisonment, and goodness knows what else! I only wish they would try to take us; I would teach them that it pays to be civil to Englishmen.—Well, what the dickens are you laughing at?" for Jack had burst into a hearty peal of laughter.

"Oh, Phil, Phil," Jack exclaimed, when at length he had regained control of himself, "you are as good as a pantomime! The idea of you, of all men, complaining of the other fellow having threatened, and put on side! Why, man alive, you were just as exasperating as you could possibly be to the poor chap; and, as to the threatening—why, you were simply breathing out threatenings and slaughter! You will have to keep your weather eye lifting, my hearty, when you get round to Havana; for that fellow will look out for you, and force you into a fight, as sure as eggs are eggs."

"All right!" answered Milsom, "I'll not disappoint him; if he wants fighting he shall have as much as he can take. But, after all, Jack, I have no doubt you are right, and that I was a bit 'trying', as my poor mother used to say. But then, you see, I was 'bluffing', doing the virtuous-indignation business, and all that, you know, for it was necessary to persuade the gentlemen that we are absolutely virtuous and innocent; it would never do to allow them to entertain the slightest shred of suspicion of the vessel, otherwise they would be continually watching her. Ah! As I expected, here comes the skipper himself to have a talk with us—and also to have a look round. I expect that, after what his lieutenant has told him, he is feeling a bit uncomfortable. But we must be civil to him and smooth him down; for, after all, there is nothing to be gained by making enemies without good and sufficient cause. And perhaps you, in your character of owner of the ship, had better tackle this fellow; then we shall have an opportunity to witness your skill as a diplomatist."

Accordingly, when the captain of the gunboat entered the yacht's gangway, it was Jack who received him, Milsom simply standing by as a sort of supporter.

The new arrival was a man apparently a few years older than his lieutenant, very distinguished looking for the commander of a mere gunboat, and with a considerably more polished and affable manner than the man who had preceded him. He raised his cap at Jack's salutation, and said, in English:

"Good afternoon, gentlemen! I am given to understand by my lieutenant that a most unfortunate mistake appears to have in some inexplicable manner arisen in connection with this vessel; and I have come on board for the purpose of putting matters right, if possible."

"You are most welcome, Señor Capitan," answered Jack cordially; "and I shall be very pleased to render you all the assistance in my power—the more so since I am very anxious to see as much as possible of your beautiful island, and may perhaps remain here for some time. Indeed, I may say that one reason for my visit to Cuba is that I have had some idea of investing in a tobacco plantation here."

"Indeed, Señor?" observed the Spaniard. "Our information pointed to a very different reason for your visit. As my lieutenant has already informed you, we have been led to believe that the presence of your yacht in Cuban waters was due to sympathy on your part with the insurgents, and a determination to assist them by smuggling munitions of war into the country for their use. And, as my lieutenant has also informed you, the *Tiburón* has been sent out specially for the purpose of seizing the vessel."

"Yes," said Jack suavely, "your lieutenant mentioned that fact—in somewhat emphatic language; so emphatic, indeed, that, if I may be permitted to say so, it was almost offensive, and my captain felt bound to adopt somewhat vigorous speech in expressing our disapproval, not only of his behaviour, but also of that of your Government. It is not usual, Señor, as you must know, for an Englishman, visiting a foreign country in his own yacht, to have his vessel seized upon the strength of a mere rumour; and you must allow me to say that, in acting as it has done, I consider your Government has not only been precipitate, but has also behaved in such a manner as will evoke a very strong protest from my own. The British Government, Señor, is not wont to have its flag fired upon without exacting ample reparation."

It was quite clear that the Spanish officer was beginning to feel exceedingly uncomfortable. He was silent for several seconds, and appeared to be reviewing the situation. At length he said:

“Señor, you must not blame my Government for the indiscretion of one of its officers. I personally am responsible for the act of firing upon your ship, which I now acknowledge to have been a quite unjustifiable act, for which I beg to tender you my most sincere and profound apologies; although I must be allowed to say that I fired under the impression that you intended to disregard my summons to heave-to.”

“I am afraid, Señor,” said Jack, “that your explanation does not go very far toward mending matters; for my contention is that you had no right to stop me on the high seas. But I will allow that to pass, and will accept your apology, for I have no wish whatever to make matters unpleasant for you personally, or for your Government; on the contrary, I am anxious to establish the most amicable relations possible between myself and the Spanish authorities during my stay in the island: therefore, having made my protest, I will say no more about it. But as there appears to have been some suspicions with regard to the character of my yacht, I must insist that either you, or someone on your behalf, shall examine the vessel at once, that you—and, through you, your Government—may be completely satisfied that such suspicions are absolutely groundless.”

“Señor,” said the Spaniard, “you overwhelm me with your generous consideration. If you will kindly permit me I should like, as well for your justification as for my own, to look over your vessel, in order that I may be in a position to absolutely assure my superiors that their suspicions are without foundation. And, to prevent all possibility of any future misunderstanding, I should like my lieutenant to be present at the inspection, if you will be so very good as to permit it.”

“By all means,” answered Jack cordially. “Pray send your boat for your lieutenant—and any other officers whom you would like to be present. The more, the better; for, Señor, you must understand that I wish your inspection of my yacht to be thorough and exhaustive.”

The Spaniard bowed and, stepping to the gangway, called down to his coxswain, instructing him to proceed to the gunboat and request Lieutenant Fernandez to come on board the English yacht forthwith. Then, during the short interval between the dispatch and the return of the boat, the Spanish Commander chatted affably with Jack and Milsom upon indifferent subjects, incidentally introducing himself as Commander Luis y Albuquerque.

Lieutenant Fernandez was in a much more subdued mood when he returned than he had been upon his departure from the *Thetis*: probably he had done some hard thinking in the interim, and had come to recognise the possibility that trouble might be looming ahead of him; at all events his manner was all courtesy and politeness as he again stepped in through the gangway.

“Señor Fernandez,” said Don Luis, “I am very much afraid that, from what Don Juan Singleton has told me, there has been a most serious mistake somewhere, and that we have thus been betrayed into unwittingly inflicting a most unprovoked affront upon an English gentleman. Señor Singleton has, however,” with a bow to Jack, “been good enough to accept my explanation and apologies, and I therefore venture to hope that we may now consider the incident as closed. But Señor Singleton insists—quite justifiably, I think—that we shall satisfy ourselves as to the falsity of the statement that he is carrying munitions of war; and I have therefore sent for you to accompany me on a tour of inspection through this yacht, which we must make so thorough that there shall be no possibility of any aspersions being hereafter cast upon the integrity of Don Juan or his vessel. And now, Señor,” to Jack, “we are ready to accompany you.”

“Very well,” said Jack. “Where would you like to begin—forward, or aft?”

“Perhaps we may as well begin forward, and work our way aft,” answered the Spanish Commander.

“Right,” acquiesced Jack. “Captain Milsom, be so good as to give instructions for two or three men to attend us below with lanterns. Meanwhile, gentlemen, perhaps you will give my boats an overhaul. I will have the canvas covers stripped off them.”

“Oh no, Señor,” protested Don Luis, “there is not the slightest necessity for us to go to such extreme lengths as that; for, assuming for a moment that you actually had contraband on board, you would not be in the least likely to carry it stowed in your boats.”

Now this offer of Jack’s was a piece of “bluff”, for his boats were the only places that he did not wish the Spaniards to examine, since in one of them was stowed his submarine, the sight of which he knew would be likely to give rise to renewed suspicions. And, as we have seen, the “bluff” worked to perfection, possibly in consequence of the slight, but none the less perceptible, tone of sarcasm in which Jack made the offer. With a feeling of carefully suppressed relief, Jack accordingly led the Spaniards forward to the forecastle, down into which the party descended, and where they found three men—one of whom was the carpenter—awaiting them with lighted lanterns. The forecastle was soon examined, and then the hatch of the forepeak was lifted, and that darksome storehouse very carefully explored. There was no passage from the forepeak into the hold, as the collision bulkhead ran from the keelson right up to the deck; and, Jack having pointed out this fact, the party emerged on deck and descended into the officers’ quarters, proceeding from thence down into the main hold, where they found nothing but iron ballast and the water tanks, every one of which Jack insisted should be opened and looked into. Thence they proceeded to the engine-room and stokehold, where they found much to admire in the scrupulous cleanliness and unusual form of the machinery, but no sign or trace of anything in the nature of contraband. Then they entered the main saloon, and examined it and the sleeping cabins, finishing up with the steward’s storeroom, the sail-room, and the powder magazine. Jack was quite prepared to be questioned about this last, and he was; but he had his answer ready.

“Is it usual, Señor Singleton, for English yachts to go as heavily armed as your vessel is?” suavely enquired Don Luis.

“Not when cruising in home waters,” answered Jack. “But when the intention is to ‘cruise foreign’, as we phrase it, especially if the cruise is to be round the world, it is usually considered prudent to provide the vessel with an armament sufficiently powerful to protect her from the attacks of pirates—Malays, Chinese, and so on—or, in fact,

aggressors of any description. For instance," he continued maliciously, "if we had not happened to have been armed to-day, just consider, Señor, how unpleasant would have been our predicament at this moment."

Don Luis frowned. "Pardon me, Señor," said he, "but I hope you are not labouring under the misapprehension that it is because of your ship being armed that I have refrained from arresting you; the suggestion is injurious, Señor. Your freedom is due entirely to the fact that I accepted the assurances which you offered to Lieutenant Fernandez, and was willing to believe that an unfortunate mistake had somehow arisen. And I trust you will also believe that, had the mistake resulted in unpleasant consequences to yourself, my Government would have hastened to make you the most ample reparation on the instant of discovering that wrong had been done you, as it will, now, if you insist—"

"Pray say no more," interrupted Jack. "I have not the slightest desire to place either you, personally, or your Government in an embarrassing position. If, therefore, you are fully satisfied that your information respecting me and my yacht was wrong, I am quite willing to regard the incident as closed, and to say nothing further about it. And in proof of my friendly disposition, permit me to say that it will afford me very great pleasure if you and your lieutenant will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner to-night."

But Don Luis very courteously declined Jack's polite invitation, upon the plea that he felt it to be his imperative duty to return forthwith to Havana, to report to the authorities there the full and true circumstances of the case, in order that Jack might be subjected to no further annoyance from the unfortunate blunder that had somehow been made. But no doubt the true explanation of his refusal was to be found in the fact that his exceedingly sensitive pride was hurt by Jack's innuendo, and by the fact that he had been placed in a false and somewhat ridiculous position. It was bad enough to be made to appear ridiculous in the eyes of one's own people; but to be humiliated before one of those arrogant, overbearing Englishmen! Caramba! The two Spaniards therefore took a most ceremonious leave of Jack and Milsom, descended to their boat, and pulled back to their own ship, which immediately started her engines and steamed away to the westward, dipping her colours in salute as she went; while the *Thetis* resumed her course to the eastward in the direction of Calonna, off which she arrived about an hour later. But the delay occasioned by the incident of the yacht's encounter with the gunboat had been just sufficient to prevent the arrival of the *Thetis* until after the last train of the day had left Calonna for Pinar del Rio. Don Hermoso therefore decided to remain on board the yacht all night, and to leave her in time to take the first train on the following morning.

Naturally enough, the chief topic of conversation at the dinner-table, that night, was the encounter with the gunboat, and the clever manner in which the Spaniards had been "bluffed", Don Hermoso maintaining that it was entirely due to Jack's skill in the gentle art that no suspicion had appeared to enter the heads of the Spaniards that the contraband had already been got rid of. The matter was very freely discussed, and it was finally decided that, on the whole, it was a very fortunate circumstance not only that the encounter had taken place, but that it had occurred where and when it did; for the ignorance of the Spanish authorities as to the speed of the yacht would naturally preclude the suspicion that the vessel had already spent some hours in discharging her cargo, while the very complete and thorough search to which the yacht had been subjected was of course conclusive, so far as the non-existence of contraband on board at that moment was concerned. The only point upon which Jack had any uneasiness was the fact of the yacht being so formidably armed; he had given what he regarded as a very clever and ingenious explanation of the circumstance, which he hoped would prove completely satisfactory, but he was nevertheless not wholly free from doubts on the matter.

On the following morning the two Montijos and Jack were astir betimes, in order to catch an early train to Pinar del Rio; and nine o'clock found them ashore and on the platform, waiting for the train to emerge from the siding into which it had been shunted. Calonna was not at that time an important place, nor is the Cuban railway system remarkable for its efficiency; nothing need therefore be said about either save that after jolting through some exceedingly beautiful country, which grew more beautiful with every mile of progress upon a gradually rising gradient, the travellers were safely landed in the city of Pinar del Rio—a distance of some fifteen miles from Calonna—in a trifle over an hour! Here Señor Montijo's private carriage—a somewhat cumbersome, four-wheeled affair, fitted with a leather awning and curtains to protect the occupants from either sun or rain, and drawn by four horses, the off leader being ridden by a postilion, while the wheelers were driven from the box—was awaiting them, it having been sent in from the house on the preceding day. The luggage having been securely strapped on to a platform attached to the rear of the coach, Don Hermoso signed to Jack to enter the vehicle, placed himself by Jack's side, and was followed by Carlos, when the affair got under way, with a tremendous amount of shouting and whip cracking, and went rolling and rumbling and jolting down the narrow street and so out into the country. There was a drive of about sixteen miles farther inland and toward the Organ Mountains before them ere they could arrive at the hacienda Montijo, and although the road was abominable, and the heat intense, Jack declared that he had never so thoroughly enjoyed a drive in his life. For the country was somewhat rugged, and the scenery therefore very lovely, the road being bordered on either side by fields of tobacco and sugar, and here and there a patch of cool green Indian corn, divided from the road by low hedges which were just then a perfect blaze of multi-coloured flowers of various descriptions. It was a fairly busy scene, too, for the tobacco was ripe, and the fields were alive with labourers of all colours, from the full-blooded negro to the pure Spaniard, gathering the crop. At length, when they had been travelling for about a couple of hours, and when, despite the charm of everything that he saw around him, Jack began to grow conscious of the fact that he was aching in every joint from the rolling and jolting of the carriage, the vehicle turned off the main road into a lane, access to which was gained through a pair of massive timber gates hung upon piers of ancient, moss-grown masonry; and Don Hermoso announced that they were now upon his own demesne. And here at once Jack became conscious of a very great change in the appearance of everything; for not only was the road upon which they were travelling smooth and well kept, but the fields on either hand, instead of being half-choked with weeds, as had been the case with most of those that they had passed, were scrupulously clean, while the labourers, instead of being picturesque scarecrows, were decently clad, and worked as men do who are content and happy. Every man of them was clearly on the lookout for the carriage, and had a word of respectful greeting for his returning master, while—what was perhaps stranger still—Don Hermoso seemed to intimately know every man, woman, and child on the place, though there were hundreds of them.

At length a bend in the road brought the house in sight, at a distance of about a mile, and Jack saw before him,

perched on the shoulder of a low eminence, a long, white, bungalow-like structure, with a high, thatched roof, and a gallery and veranda running along the whole length of the front, and apparently along the sides also. The building was of one storey only, and although the veranda was so broad as to cast the whole of the front into deep shadow it seemed to Jack that that front was pierced by at least a dozen doors and windows. As Jack looked, two female figures clad in white suddenly made their appearance in the centre of the gallery, and so beautifully clear was the atmosphere that, even at that distance, it could be distinctly seen that they were waving their pocket handkerchiefs to the occupants of the coach. Carlos also saw them, and frantically waved his panama by way of reply, shouting, as he did so:

“Hurrah, Padre; hurrah, Jack! Look! there are the Madre and Isolda out on the gallery, waving to us! I’ll bet that they have been watching the bend of the road through their opera-glasses for the last hour or more!”

“Doubtless,” answered Don Hermoso, laughing happily as he too leaned out of the coach to wave a greeting. “Since we did not arrive last night, as arranged, they have naturally expected us to turn up early this morning.”

Winding hither and thither along the hillside, in order to secure an even and easy gradient, the road presently left the tobacco fields and passed between broad spaces of lawn luxuriantly clad with guinea-grass, and having large parterres of flowers scattered about it here and there; while in other places it was picturesquely broken up by clumps of feathery bamboo, or gigantic wild cotton and other trees. At length, with a final dash and a grand flourish, the carriage drew up in front of the broad flight of stone steps that led up the scarp and flower-strewn face of the mound upon which the house was built; and one of the two female figures came rushing down the steps, bareheaded, despite the almost vertical sun, and flung herself into the outstretched arms of Don Hermoso, while the other followed in a somewhat more stately and dignified manner.

Then, when Don Hermoso had released this first figure from his embrace, and turned, hat in hand, to meet the second, Señorita Isolda treated her brother Carlos to a like greeting, after which she turned, with a sunny smile and eyes flashing welcome, to Jack.

“Isolda,” exclaimed Carlos, performing the ceremony of introduction, “this, as you will of course have guessed, is my old friend and chum, Jack Singleton, to whom we are so deeply indebted for the very valuable assistance that he has rendered us in our great undertaking. He is the best friend and comrade that ever lived, therefore give him a cordial welcome, for my sake, dear.”

“I give you a thousand welcomes, Señor Jack,” she exclaimed impulsively, as she offered her hand, “and a thousand thanks for all that you have done for my father and Carlos. I am delighted that you have been able to come to us, for I seem to know you quite well; Carlos has talked so often about you, and of what you used to do together in the old days at Dulwich, that I feel it quite impossible to regard you as a stranger.”

For perhaps the first time in his life Jack Singleton found himself at a loss for words. As a rule he had plenty to say for himself, but now he found himself suddenly dumb. He had heard his friend Carlos speak of his sister Isolda with patronising, brotherly affection as “a good child”, “a nice little thing”, “not half a bad sort”, and so on, and he seemed to remember that only a day or two ago Carlos had casually mentioned that his sister was just sixteen years of age; he had therefore pictured the girl to himself as a hoyden, in the transition stage of frocks that are neither short nor long, but betwixt and between, a girl with hair flying loose about her shoulders—in short, a girl. And now, all unprepared, he found himself grasping the hand of a glorious creature of absolutely dazzling loveliness, with the face, form, and manners of an irresistibly fascinating woman, who, despite her sixteen years of age, looked as though she might be quite twenty. He stammered out a few halting and stumbling words of thanks for her kindly welcome of him, feeling all the time that he would have liked to kick himself for his stupid gaucherie; and then turned to receive the greeting of Señora Montijo. This lady was simply an older edition of her lovely daughter, with a more composed and stately manner, and her welcome to Jack was cordiality itself; and presently they all turned and made their way into the house, which they entered by way of a wide doorway furnished with two leaves, now thrown wide open, the upper panels of which were fitted with Venetian lattices for the admission of air and the exclusion of the too-ardent beams of the sun. This doorway gave entrance to a large, marble-paved hall extending the entire depth of the house from front to back, as was to be seen from the fact that another door, opposite that by which the party had just entered, stood wide open, through which could be seen another broad veranda running along the back of the house, beyond which could be caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a kind of courtyard, with more lawns and flower beds, and a handsome fountain in the centre. The hall was adorned with beautiful flowering plants in large tubs, and furnished with an abundant supply of settees and luxuriously-cushioned basket chairs, and seemed to be used as a kind of lounging place, for which it was eminently adapted, since the two open doors caused a constant draught of comparatively cool air through the apartment. There were a few good pictures on the walls, as well as a gun-rack, well fitted with sporting guns and rifles; and a hatstand which, in addition to its legitimate use, formed a convenient support for sundry riding-whips and pairs of spurs. Two passages, leading to right and left out of this hall, gave access, as Jack subsequently discovered, to the rooms located at the extremities of the building.

“Now, Jack, old chap,” said Carlos, linking his arm in that of his friend, after a moment’s murmured conversation with his mother, “let me take you to your room. You will be glad to have a wash and brush-up after our dusty journey; and by the time that you are ready, second breakfast will be served.” And, so saying, he conducted Singleton out through the rear door of the hall into the back veranda, which, as Jack now saw, ran not only along the entire rear face of the main building but also along the face of two wings which projected therefrom at right angles, one at each end of the house. These wings, it appeared, provided the sleeping accommodation, bathrooms, lavatories, and so on, of the establishment; beyond which again were the kitchen and other domestic offices, and the coach-house and stables, with the lawn, fountain, and flower beds between, the buildings being shaded not only by the broad veranda, but also by rows of orange, lemon, lime, and peach trees, the fragrance from which imparted an indescribably refreshing character to the air. Turning to the left as they emerged from the hall, Carlos conducted his friend along the left wing until they reached the last door but one, which the young Cuban threw open, ushering his friend into a neatly furnished and clean bedroom, in which Jack’s overland trunk had already been deposited.

"The Madre has put you in here, Jack," Carlos explained, "because the room faces east, and will therefore be cool when you turn in at night, while the trees in front shield it from the morning sun. Also it is next to the men's bathroom, and therefore will be handy for your bath, night and morning. Now, there are water, soap, and towels; if you require anything else, shout for Antonio, and he will bring you whatever you want. Breakfast will be ready in a quarter of an hour."

Chapter Seven.

Don Sebastian Alvaros threatens trouble.

"Second breakfast" in the West Indies is the equivalent of luncheon in England, except that the former is perhaps the more elaborate meal of the two; when therefore Jack, escorted by Carlos, entered the fine, airy dining-room, it at once became evident that he was about to sit down to a very substantial repast, for which he was not at all sorry, as the long journey had given him a most excellent appetite. Moreover, he had by this time recovered the equilibrium which had been so seriously disturbed by his first sight of Señorita Isolda, and had again found the use of his tongue; it was therefore a very gay and happy quintette that arranged itself around the well-furnished table. Jack was of course by this time on almost as intimate terms with Don Hermoso as he was with Carlos, and he presently discovered that the ladies were disposed to treat him rather as an old friend than as a new acquaintance; and he told himself that his visit to Cuba promised to be one of the most pleasant experiences of his life.

The meal over, Don Hermoso excused himself, as there were naturally many matters demanding his earliest attention after his long absence from home; while the Señora had her household affairs to attend to. Carlos therefore took the task of entertaining Jack upon himself, with his sister as chief assistant, and proposed a ride, as there were many charming spots in the neighbourhood that he wished his friend to see. The horses were accordingly ordered, and the three young people, despising the usual afternoon siesta, set off, taking a path which led upward through a wild and most picturesque ravine, down which a mountain stream brawled and foamed, the murmurous tumult of its waters mingling musically with the sigh of the wind in the multitudinous trees that clothed the hillsides, and imparting a most welcome sensation of coolness to the atmosphere. They rode at a foot pace, first because they were in no hurry, and secondly because the path was narrow and rough, there being room only for two riders abreast; Carlos therefore led the way, with Jack and Doña Isolda following close at his horse's tail. They had not been ten minutes under way when they arrived at a spot the marvellous natural beauty of which caused Jack to exclaim aloud in his astonishment: for upon rounding a bend in the path they found themselves in a little amphitheatre, about five hundred yards across, the tree-clad sides of which rose precipitously to a great height on either hand, and were gorgeous with great clustering blooms of every imaginable hue, from purest white through every shade of colour to a deep rich purple that looked almost black where seen in shadow; while the air, almost motionless down in the hollow, was heavy with the mingling of a thousand exquisite perfumes. The floor of this amphitheatre consisted of a great basin of rock, partly filled with fine white sand brought down from the uplands during countless generations by the flow of the stream, the basin being brimful of crystal-clear water which came pouring and plashing into it from above over a series of miniature cataracts, the lowest of which, about twelve feet high, impinged upon a small ledge of rock which projected into the basin for the space of about a yard.

"This," said Carlos, "is our swimming bath, to which we often come for a dip in the early morning; it is absolutely private, all this being our own property, and nobody but ourselves ever passes here. What think you of it, Jack; is it not perfect?"

Jack pronounced it magnificent, and there and then undertook to join Carlos in a dip on the following and every other morning during his stay. The water was about twenty feet deep, and the place was consequently perfect for swimming in. By the side of the road, at a spot where there happened to be a few square yards of level ground, the surface had been cleared of the luxuriant undergrowth, and a small bathing house, containing two dressing-rooms—one for either sex—had been erected; and here the bathing dresses were kept and the necessary changes of costume made.

Having spent a little time in admiring this glorious bathing pool, the party moved onward again, and, following the ever-rising path, at length, after a most delightful ride of about five miles through a continuous succession of scenes of surpassing beauty, emerged upon an open tableland, from which a most extensive and glorious view of mile upon mile of the southern slope of the island was to be obtained, with the sea shining in soft, opalescent tints beyond, and the Isla de Pinos, with its three curiously shaped mountains, lying on the horizon. The white sails of a few coasting craft gleamed pearl-like here and there, just discernible at that distance, and Jack searched the watery expanse for some sign of the *Thetis*; but she had vanished. Doubtless she was on the other side of Cape San Antonio by this time, and therefore well on her way round to Havana. Being thus reminded of the existence of the yacht, Jack was suddenly inspired with a brilliant idea, which he promptly communicated to Carlos.

"Look here, Carlos, old chap," he exclaimed, "if the yacht is not likely to be required for other service just at present, why should not we all take a cruise in her round the island and over to Jamaica, from whence we might even go on to some of the other islands? I am sure that the trip would do your mother and sister a vast amount of good. Have you ever been out of Cuba, Señorita?"

"Never," answered Doña Isolda. "I was born here, and, less lucky than Carlos, was also educated here; so that I know nothing whatever about the great outside world, save what I have read of it in books. Havana is my conception of a great and handsome city, so you may guess how ignorant I am, and how intensely I should enjoy seeing other places. Do you think, Carlos mio, that Señor Singleton's suggestion is possible of realisation?"

"It may be," answered Carlos, a little doubtfully. "Everything will, of course, depend upon what news may come from the Junta. I know that the Padre has placed the vessel unreservedly at their disposal—rather unwisely, I think—and I

shall be very much surprised if they do not make the fullest possible use of her. But, of course, if she is not likely to be required for a month or two, I think it would be an admirable plan for us all to go for a cruise in her. It would tend to avert suspicion from her, too, for I am pretty certain that it will not be wise to leave her lying idle in Havana or in any other of our harbours. I will mention the matter to the Padre at the first favourable opportunity."

"I am sure it would do Mamma a vast amount of good," remarked Señorita Isolda; "and it might also have the effect of putting a stop to the visits of Señor Alvaros, who is fast becoming an unendurable nuisance."

"Indeed! In what way?" demanded Carlos sharply.

"Why," answered Señorita Isolda, "we are never free from him. He rides over here three or four times a week, and makes himself as much at home as though the place belonged to him, although he has never received the slightest encouragement either from Mamma or from me. And then he bores me with his unwelcome attentions."

"Ah!" ejaculated Carlos through his clenched teeth; "somehow I feared as much. The fellow must be choked off by some means. The question is, how to do it without giving offence. You see," he continued, turning to Jack, "we Cubans are in an exceedingly awkward position, and are obliged to walk most circumspectly. We are compelled to submit to many things that are utterly distasteful to us, for if we did not we should at once be suspected of harbouring designs inimical to the Government; and, once regarded with suspicion, our liberty, our property, ay, even our lives, would be imperilled."

"A confoundedly unpleasant state of things, in truth," said Jack; "but surely it does not extend so far that you dare not give a man a hint that his visits to your house are distasteful?"

"Indeed it does, though," answered Carlos. "Suppose, for example, that my father were to hint to this fellow Alvaros that he is not wanted here, and that his visits must cease, the probability is that the man—who, I may mention, is captain of a regiment of infantry—would at once proceed to hint to his superiors that all is not right with us, when there is no knowing what dreadful thing might happen. The fact is, that the pride of these fellows is so intense and so sensitive, and they are withal so destitute of principle, that if a man dares to offend one of them he at once makes every Spaniard in the island his enemy."

"How would it be if I were to pick a quarrel with him?" suggested Jack. "They would not dare to interfere with me."

"I am by no means so sure of that," answered Carlos. "They could do nothing to you openly, of course; but open, honest, daylight methods are not regarded here with very much respect just at present, and you might perhaps mysteriously disappear. Oh, no, it would never do for you to attempt to interfere, Jack! On the contrary, you must most studiously refrain from anything and everything that would be in the least likely to breed ill blood between you and the Spaniards, because—who knows?—we may need your help ere long. And that you could only effectively give by maintaining good relations with the Government and its representatives."

Conversing thus, they at length turned their horses' heads and slowly took their way back toward the house; and by the time that they reached it Jack found himself upon terms of almost as complete intimacy with Señorita Isolda as those he was on with her brother. For, despite the intense pride which seems to be so strongly marked a characteristic of all who have Spanish blood in their veins, Señorita Isolda was a most charmingly ingenuous, unsophisticated girl, frank and open as the day; furthermore, she had been so long accustomed to hear Jack spoken of admiringly by Carlos that she had insensibly acquired a strong predisposition in his favour; and, finally, and quite contrary to rule, when at length she met him in the flesh she instantly decided that this stalwart, handsome young Englishman was all that Carlos had represented him to be—and very much more.

Upon reaching the house they found, to their disgust, that Captain Alvaros had again turned up, ostensibly for the purpose of bidding Don Hermoso and Carlos welcome back to Cuba and hearing from them an account of their holiday wanderings in Europe. Jack found the Spanish soldier to be a man of about thirty-two years of age, tall, swarthy, and by no means ill-looking; but such physical advantages as he possessed were heavily discounted by a pair of piercing, black, sinister-looking eyes, and a distinctly arrogant, overbearing manner; the man evidently thought well of himself, and took no trouble to conceal the fact. He greeted Jack's appearance in Señorita Isolda's company with something very nearly approaching a scowl, and coldly acknowledged Señora Montijo's formal introduction of the young man with an air of careless hauteur that was eloquent of his disapproval of the young man's presence in the house, which he further emphasised by thereafter contemptuously ignoring Jack—for a time. Carlos flushed with angry annoyance as he beheld this treatment of his friend, for which he apologised as soon as the pair were alone together; but Jack's sunny temperament was not so easily ruffled, and he simply laughed, saying:

"Don't you let that worry you, old chap; it doesn't hurt me in the least. I don't care a brass button whether the man likes or dislikes me; I care neither for his friendship nor his enmity. I am not of a quarrelsome disposition, as you know, but should he attempt to be actively disagreeable, or to force a quarrel upon me, I have no doubt that I shall know how to take care of myself."

When the party again met at the dinner-table there were indications that Señor Alvaros had made up his mind to treat Jack as a person much too insignificant to be worthy of the least notice: but he soon found that he must either abandon this line of policy or himself be left out in the cold, for the Montijos, one and all, persisted in including Jack in the conversation; and very quietly and unobtrusively, but none the less firmly, contrived to make Señor Alvaros understand that the young Englishman was already regarded as one of themselves. Seeing this, he changed his tactics and artfully endeavoured to entrap Jack into an expression of opinion upon the politics of the island: but the young man was not to be so easily caught; he laughingly disclaimed any knowledge of or interest in political questions of any kind, and pointed out that in any case his acquaintance with Cuba was altogether too recent to have enabled him to form even the most elementary opinion on the question, at the same time mentioning as a general axiom that Englishmen were usually regarded as cherishing a weakness in favour of good government and the

maintenance of law and order.

And later on in the evening, when the party adjourned to the drawing-room, the soldier again found his endeavours to pose as a *persona grata* quietly ignored. He would fain have monopolised the society of Doña Isolda for the remainder of the evening, and attempted to carry her off with him to a remote corner of the room, but Carlos would have none of it. His sister had a good voice, and had been taught to use it to the best advantage, and he wanted his friend Jack to hear her sing some of the old-fashioned Andalusian folksongs, which she did with cheerfulness and alacrity, promptly recognising Carlos' intention and eagerly seconding it. Then Carlos proclaimed that Jack was a singer and an accomplished pianist, and insisted that his friend should sing and play to them; and when Señor Alvaros privately confided to Señorita Isolda his opinion that English music was simply barbarous, and Englishmen utterly unendurable, the young lady unhesitatingly declared that she entirely disagreed with him. Altogether, Señor Alvaros spent a distinctly unpleasant evening, for which circumstance he blamed the young Englishman; and as he rode back to his quarters that night he cursed the English nation freely, and Jack in particular, for whom, he decided, there was no room in Cuba. And the worst of it all was that not a word had been said, not a thing had been done, to which he could openly take the slightest exception.

But how was this pestilent young cub of an Englishman to be got rid of? That was the question that worried Alvaros during the greater part of that night and the whole of the next day. The first impulse of the Spaniard was to deprive the Montijo family of his (Alvaros') countenance and society until, alarmed at the loss, they should dismiss the cause of it: but upon further reflection he came to the conclusion that it might be unwise to adopt so very drastic a step, for two very good and sufficient reasons, the first of which was that, being impecunious himself, he had fully made up his mind to marry Doña Isolda and thus acquire a substantial interest in the Montijo property and estates, and was therefore unwilling to do anything which might possibly jeopardise the position which he had worked so hard to gain as a friend of the family; while the second reason was that he was by no means sure that his abstention would be regarded by the Montijos as a matter of very great moment. Then it was most unfortunate that Jack was not only an Englishman, but a young man doubtless of position and substance, or he would not be the owner of so costly a plaything as a steam-yacht. Had he been anything but an Englishman, or an American, it would have been comparatively easy to have had him arrested upon a charge of complicity with the insurgents; but these nations had a most awkward and inconvenient habit of looking after their people, and whenever one of them chanced to get into trouble their Governments always insisted upon instituting the most exhaustive enquiries into the matter, and were wont to make it understood, with almost brutal distinctness of manner, that they would not tolerate anything that bore the slightest suspicion of irregularity. He had heard it whispered that the authorities had received a hint from their spies on the other side to look out for a yacht which was suspected of having on board contraband for the use of the insurgents; but he argued that the vessel in question could scarcely be the craft owned by this young man, for the simple reason that there appeared to be nothing of a surreptitious or secret nature in his movements, or in those of his yacht, which, as he understood, was, or would very shortly be, in Havana harbour. No, the more he thought about it, the more profoundly was he convinced that it would be impossible to bring about Jack's removal by an attempt to involve him in the political unrest of the islanders. Some other means must be tried. He wondered whether, perchance, it might be possible to frighten the young man into an early departure from the casa Montijo and the island. It was not a very easy matter to frighten an Englishman, he knew, and this particular one impressed Alvaros as being especially unpromising in that respect; still, there was no harm in trying. Accordingly when, upon the next day but one, the Spaniard again rode over to call upon the Montijos, he made an opportunity to take Jack on one side for a moment and ask him whether he had yet fixed a date for his departure from the island.

"A date for my departure?" echoed Jack. "Certainly not, Señor. On the contrary, it is my intention to make quite a long stay here, and see Cuba from end to end. It is even possible that I may decide to purchase a property on the island, and try my luck as a tobacco planter."

"I fervently trust not, Señor, for your own sake," said Alvaros. "Permit me to offer you a little friendly advice. Cut short your visit, and leave Cuba at once. I advise you, as a friend, to do so."

"Indeed!" said Jack. "And why, pray? Of course you have some good reason for offering me this advice, Señor Alvaros?"

"Yes," answered Alvaros, "I have; and it is this. Cuba is in a most unsettled state at present. She is seething with rebellion, and all strangers are regarded with the utmost suspicion by the Government. Nothing would be easier than for you to find yourself involved in one of the numerous conspiracies which we know to be brewing; and, once involved, you would find it exceedingly difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to extricate yourself. Therefore take my advice, and go forthwith. It is good advice; for I tell you plainly that you are not wanted here!"

"Thanks!" answered Jack coolly. "I am very much obliged to you, Señor Alvaros, for the friendly feeling which has prompted you to give me what I suppose you wish me to understand as a 'warning'. But I must tell you candidly that I believe you are taking a very exaggerated view of the danger—if danger there be, which I greatly doubt. But, danger or no danger, I shall still carry out my original plans; and if danger should come—well, I daresay I shall be quite able to take care of myself."

So that was no good! The Spaniard had feared that it would not be of much use to attempt to frighten an Englishman; and so it had proved. Well, there were other ways, and those must be tried.

After Alvaros had left, that night, and the family had separated, Jack accompanied Carlos into the room of the latter, and related what had passed between the Spanish officer and himself, asking Carlos for his opinion upon the subject.

"I will tell you, Jack, just exactly what I think," answered Carlos, after considering the matter for some few minutes. "You must know that Captain Alvaros made our acquaintance about a year ago, at a ball given in Havana by the Capitan-General of the island. After that he contrived to meet one or more of us on frequent occasions; and finally he requested the Padre's permission to visit us. We none of us particularly liked him; but it is not altogether wise policy

to offend a Spaniard, especially if he happens to be an official, in these times, and so the Padre rather reluctantly gave his consent, and Alvaros accordingly called here occasionally. While we have been away, however, it appears that the man has somehow contrived to get himself posted at Pinar del Rio, which, as you are aware, is not very far from here; and I learn that since then his calls have been so frequent as to have become a thorough nuisance. Now, from what my sister tells me, I have a suspicion that Alvaros is anxious to contract a matrimonial alliance with our family—which, I may tell you at once, Jack, he will not be permitted to do; and my belief is that the fellow simply cannot endure to see another man in Isolda's society, and that is why he wants you to go. But of course you won't; and I am very glad indeed that you made that quite clear to him. He was evidently trying to scare you off what he apparently chooses to consider his preserves; but if he knew you as well as I do, Jack, he would understand that it needs a good deal more than the vague hints of a captain of Spanish infantry to frighten you. Now, my advice to you is to take no notice whatever of the beggar, and if he tries it on again—well, just repeat what you said to-night. And—perhaps it will be better not to mention the matter, at all events just yet, to the Padre, or in fact anyone else."

"All right, old chap," answered Jack; "you may trust me. But, look here, Carlos, I hope that my presence in this house is not going to involve any of you in trouble or difficulty of any sort with the Government. If I thought that there was the least likelihood of that—"

"My dear chap, there isn't," interrupted Carlos. "We are one of the oldest and most influential families in Cuba; and the Spaniards know perfectly well that to meddle with us would be to make a very serious mistake. So do not allow any idea of that kind to worry you in the least. You will stay on here just as long as you like; and the longer you stay the better we shall all be pleased. Besides, there is going to be a rising here before long, and then you will have an opportunity to witness several very interesting things."

Two days later Captain Alvaros again presented himself; but this time, instead of entering the house in his usual free and easy manner, he enquired for Don Hermoso and, upon learning that that gentleman was in his office, sent in a formal request for a private interview. He was at once admitted, and found Don Hermoso seated at a large writing table, which was strewn with account books and papers. The Don accorded his visitor a courteous if somewhat stiff welcome, and, having requested him to be seated, enquired in what way he could be of service—for this formal visit had somehow suggested to Don Hermoso the idea that Captain Alvaros desired to borrow money from him.

"Such a visit as this from me, Don Hermoso, can have but one object, and I think you will have no difficulty in guessing what that object is," replied Alvaros, with a somewhat embarrassed laugh.

"Pardon me, Señor," answered Don Hermoso; "you credit me with a much larger measure of perspicacity than I can lay claim to. To be perfectly frank with you, I cannot conceive why you should desire a private interview with me, unless—how shall I put it?—unless—you find yourself in a position of temporary pecuniary embarrassment; and in that case I should have thought that—"

"Señor Montijo," exclaimed Alvaros, starting to his feet indignantly, "do you wish to insult me?"

"Certainly not, Señor," answered Don Hermoso blandly. "Pray be seated, and dismiss from your mind at once any such unworthy suspicion. Why should I desire to insult you? But if I am mistaken in my guess as to the object of your visit, would it not be best for you to state your business with me explicitly?"

"I will, Señor," answered Alvaros. "To be both explicit and brief, then, I have called upon you this morning for the purpose of demanding the hand of your daughter, Señorita Isolda, in marriage."

"To demand—the hand of—my daughter—in marriage?" gasped Don Hermoso in amazement.

"Certainly, Señor Montijo," retorted Alvaros haughtily. "Surely there is nothing so very extraordinary in making such a demand, is there?"

"Nothing very extraordinary, certainly," returned Don Hermoso, who had quickly recovered a grip upon himself; "but something most entirely unexpected, I assure you. You do me and my family too much honour, Señor Alvaros. I presume you have some reason for supposing that your suit will be acceptable to my daughter?"

"I have never had any reason to suppose otherwise, Señor," answered Alvaros. "But even were the Señorita to entertain any foolish objections—or imagine that she entertained them—I presume it would make no difference in your decision. If she does not actually entertain any sentiment of love for me at this moment I have not a shadow of doubt as to my ability to inspire that sentiment as soon as we are married. The young lady will raise no objection, I presume, if she is given to understand that the marriage would be in conformity with your wishes; and I imagine it is quite unnecessary for me to point out to you how very greatly to your advantage and that of your whole family such a marriage would be."

"Advantage, did you say, Señor?" retorted Don Hermoso. "Pardon me, I am afraid that I am unusually dull to-day, but I am compelled to confess that for the moment I scarcely see in what respect such an alliance would be an advantage to us. If it would not be troubling you too much, would you kindly explain?"

"Surely, Señor Montijo, it ought not to be very difficult for you to see how highly advantageous it would be for you and yours to be allied in marriage to an officer of some distinction—if I may be permitted to say so—in the Spanish Army!" exclaimed Alvaros, in tones of haughty surprise. "I am a scion of one of the best families of Spain, while you, if you will pardon me for reminding you of the fact, are merely a Cuban; and in these troublous days no Cuban is entirely free from suspicion—"

"Enough, Señor!" interrupted Don Hermoso indignantly. "You appear to despise me as 'merely a Cuban'; but you either forget, or are ignorant of, the fact that my father was born in Spain, and there are few Spanish names that stand higher than that of Montijo. You have made a mistake, Señor, in presuming to claim superiority for yourself

over my family. I decline the honour of the alliance which you have proposed; and I trust that, under these circumstances, you will see the propriety of discontinuing your visits to my house."

For nearly a full minute Alvaros glared at Don Hermoso, as though he could scarcely believe that he had heard aright, could scarcely credit the fact that a "rascally Cuban", as he mentally termed Montijo, had had the unparalleled, the unspeakable audacity to spurn—ay, spurn was the correct word—an alliance with him, Don Sebastian Alvaros, Captain in the army of His Majesty the King of Spain! It was unthinkable! It was an insult that could only be wiped out by blood! And yet it would be exceedingly awkward to quarrel with these people; for if he did it would put an end at once and for ever to any possibility of marriage with the daughter. And he simply must marry her, by hook or by crook: his honour demanded it, for he had already boasted freely among his fellow-officers of his conquest of the fairest maid in Cuba; and his credit also demanded it, for he had made the same boast to the money-lenders in Havana, and had raised considerable sums of money on the strength of it. Swallowing his rage, therefore, he made an attempt to retrace that false step by exclaiming:

"Pardon me, Don Hermoso, but I have been most unfortunate in my choice of words, and, believe me, you have entirely mistaken my meaning. What I really intended to convey was—"

But in that brief minute of silence Don Hermoso had read the man's real character in his face, and had instantly come to the conclusion that he would rather see his daughter lying dead than in the power of such a ruffian; he therefore cut short the officer's protestations by assuring him that his words admitted of no misinterpretation, and that therefore he must persist in his refusal.

"Very well, then," exclaimed Alvaros, "if you prefer to have me for an enemy, instead of a friend and ally, be it so, Señor Montijo; I will not disappoint you. But beware! You have insulted me, and I am a man who never forgets or forgives an insult!"

And, springing to his feet, he dashed his braided cap on to his head, strode clanking and jingling to the door, and so took his departure without further word of farewell.

Chapter Eight.

Señor Alvaros gets to work.

For fully a quarter of an hour after the departure of Alvaros, Don Hermoso sat plunged in a deep and somewhat anxious reverie. He scarcely knew whether he was more pleased or annoyed at what had just happened: for, on the one hand, he was at last rid of a distinctly uncongenial acquaintance, which had been almost thrust upon him in the first instance, and which had proved ever more uncongenial and unwelcome with the lapse of time; while, on the other hand, he fully recognised that he had made for himself a vindictive and implacable enemy who, although not very formidable or dangerous just then, might at any moment become so. For although Señor Montijo was one of the most important and influential persons in the island, he was a Cuban; and, as such, he was well aware that, thanks to the corruption which was then rampant among the Spanish officials of the Government, there could be no hope of justice for him if he were brought into collision with any of these officials, of whom, of course, Alvaros was one. The word of a Cuban, however important his position might be, was of absolutely no weight whatever; and Don Hermoso was fully aware that it would be no very difficult matter for Alvaros to absolutely ruin him if he chose. Yet even ruin would be preferable to seeing his beloved daughter the wife and slave of such a man as Alvaros had proved himself to be; and, for the rest, should it come to be war to the knife between them—well, he must take his chance with the rest of the Cubans, and trust to the coming revolution to enable him to hold his own.

His reverie was interrupted by the arrival of Milsom, who, having taken the *Thetis* into Havana harbour and snugly berthed her there, and further made every possible provision for her safety, had turned her over to the capable care of Perkins, her chief mate, and had now come on by train as far as Pinar del Rio, and from thence by Don Hermoso's carriage, to pay his promised visit to the hacienda Montijo. He was full of glee at the unconcealed uneasiness with which the Spanish officials regarded the presence of the yacht in the harbour; and their evident belief that, despite the strict search of the vessel by the commander and lieutenant of the *Tiburón*, she carried, hidden away in some cleverly-contrived place of concealment, the contraband of which they had been informed by their spies on the other side of the Atlantic.

"They have put on board us no less than four custom-house officers—empleados de la aduana, as they call them—to see that nothing is surreptitiously landed from the ship," he exclaimed with boisterous enjoyment; "and four boats now guard around us every night! Oh, they are a great people, these Spaniards!"

Then he went on to relate how, a few hours after his arrival, a boat had come alongside from the *Tiburón*, which was also lying in the harbour, bearing a challenge for him from Lieutenant Silvio Fernandez, her lieutenant, who demanded satisfaction from him for his insulting behaviour on the occasion of the yacht being stopped by the gunboat; and how he had accepted the challenge to fight and, being the challenged party, had chosen fists as the weapons wherewith the duel was to be fought: and he made merry over the lieutenant's indignation when he had declined to accept swords or pistols as a substitute for fists. "Of course," he concluded, "the fight did not come off, although I remained in Havana forty-eight hours longer than I originally intended, in order to give Señor Fernandez every chance."

During dinner, that night, Don Hermoso related to his family and guests the particulars of the interview that had occurred between him and Alvaros in the afternoon; and if he had, even for a moment, entertained the slightest doubt as to the wisdom of the step which he had taken in declining Alvaros' proposal and dismissing him from the house, it was finally dissipated when Señorita Isolda expressed in quite unmistakable terms her relief and gratification.

The next few days sped very pleasantly, for the young people, at any rate, who passed their time in shooting, or in taking long rides about the surrounding country; and Señora Isolda frequently found herself contrasting the genial, hearty friendliness and chivalrous courtesy of her brother's English friends with the stiff, haughty, overbearing manner and overweening conceit of the Spanish officers, who seemed to think that such attentions as they chose to pay her ought to be regarded as a vast condescension on their part.

It was about a week after the dismissal of Alvaros by Don Hermoso that, at the end of a long and fatiguing day's shooting, ending up with a very pleasant musical evening, the party in the casa Montijo retired, somewhat late, to their several rooms; and Jack Singleton, weary with much tramping under the scorching sun, lost no time in disrobing and flinging himself, with his pyjama suit as his only covering, upon his bed, where he almost instantly sank into a sound and dreamless sleep. He had probably been asleep for at least three hours, although it seemed to him only as many minutes, when he suddenly started broad awake, with the disagreeable feeling that he was no longer alone, or rather, to put it more exactly, that someone had that instant stealthily entered his room by way of the window, which, as is customary in Cuba, had been left wide open for the admission of every possible breath of air.

For a moment he lay perfectly still, listening intently, and peering the while into the darkness which encompassed him. All was perfectly still, however, save for the faint rustle in the night breeze of the mosquito curtains which surrounded his bed, and the musical tinkling of the waters of the fountain outside; while the darkness was so intense that it was only with the utmost difficulty he could dimly discern the opening of the window, which, it will be remembered, looked out upon a patio, or kind of courtyard. Suddenly the room was faintly illumined for a moment by a flicker of summer lightning, and Jack felt almost positive that during that fraction of a second he caught a glimpse of something by the open window which had certainly not been there when he retired for the night—something which suggested a crouching human figure. Stretching out his hand, Jack cautiously and noiselessly parted the mosquito curtains, with the object of getting a clear view when the next flash should come, as come he knew it would. And come it did, a minute or two later, disclosing to the young man's astonished gaze a form on hands and knees, about halfway between the window and the bed. As before, the glimmer of the lightning was but momentary, but, brief as it was, it sufficed Jack to see that the individual, whoever he might be, held a long, murderous-looking knife in his right hand; and the inference was obvious that he was there for no good purpose. Jack had learned, among other things, to act promptly and with decision, and no sooner was he again in darkness than, with a single bound, he was on his feet on the floor, where he instantly came into violent collision with the stranger, who was at that precise moment in the very act of rising from his knees. Brief as had been the flicker of the lightning, it had enabled Jack to measure his distance and to note the exact spot occupied by the unknown: the moment, therefore, that he came into contact with the intruder his left hand fell unerringly upon the right wrist of the other, which he seized in so vice-like a grip that the arm became immovable; while with his right he grasped the man by the throat and thrust him violently backward, at the same instant twining his right leg round the legs of his antagonist, with the result that both crashed to the ground, Jack being uppermost. His antagonist was an immensely powerful man, lithe and sinewy as a leopard, and he struggled furiously to free himself, hitting out savagely with his free left hand and landing one or two very nasty blows on Jack's face; until the latter, with one knee on his prostrate foe's chest, managed to get the other upon his left forearm and thus pin it to the ground. Meanwhile Jack's grip upon the throat of the man was by no means to be shaken off, and the struggles of the stranger were rapidly growing weaker as the breath was remorselessly choked out of him, when Milsom and Carlos, both of whom had been awaked by the commotion, dashed into the room, bearing lights, and loudly demanding to know what was the matter.

"I'll be shot if I know," answered Jack; "but I daresay this chap can tell us. He got in through the window; and as the lightning showed him to be a stranger, and I also noticed that he carried a rather formidable-looking knife, it occurred to me that it might be wise to make a prisoner of him, and get him to tell us who he is, and what he wants. Now, friend, I will trouble you for that knife." The man surrendered the weapon with a sullen scowl. "Thanks!" said Jack. "Now you may stand up."

The man rose to his feet, revealing to the gaze of the three friends a tall and sinewy form, attired in the picturesquely-tattered garb of a muleteer, or wagoner. The fellow was a low-class Spaniard, of singularly vicious and disreputable appearance; and as he glared vindictively at his captor he looked capable of anything, murder included. For a moment he appeared inclined to make a desperate bid for liberty; but as Jack had slipped between him and the open window, while Milsom, with a cocked revolver in his hand, stood with his back against the closed door of the apartment, he thought better of it, and simply enquired:

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

"That will depend, to some extent, upon the answers which you may see fit to give to our questions," answered Carlos. "First of all, who are you; and what errand brought you here?"

"My name, Señor Montijo, is Panza—Antonio Panza; my present occupation is that of a carrier of goods; and I suppose I may as well confess at once that my business here was to murder the English señor, your friend."

"To murder me?" repeated Jack. "And why, pray? What harm have I ever done you, that you should desire to murder me?"

"None whatever, Señor," answered the man. "But it would appear that you have harmed somebody else, or I should not have been hired to slit your throat."

"So," exclaimed Carlos, "that is the explanation, is it? I suspected as much! And pray who is the coward who hired you to do his dirty work for him?"

"Ah, pardon, Señor; that is just what I may not tell you!" answered Panza. "I was paid handsomely to undertake this piece of work; and it was part of the bargain that, should I fail, I was to keep my employer's secret."

"Is it permissible to ask how much you were paid?" demanded Jack.

"Certainly, Señor," answered the fellow. "I was paid fifty doubloons to kill you, if I could, and to hold my tongue about it."

"Fifty doubloons—a trifle over fifty pounds sterling!" exclaimed Jack, in comic disgust. "Is that all that my life is worth to your employer?"

"He told me that it was the utmost he could afford to give, Señor; and it was quite enough to tempt me. Why, were I to work all my life at my trade as a carrier, I could never hope to save fifty doubloons, nay, nor the fourth part of that sum. It is not so very long ago that I risked my life constantly as a contrabandista, for a profit of one-fifth of that amount."

"Well, Antonio," said Carlos, "according to your own showing you have a very elastic conscience, which you appear to have made pretty completely subservient to your own interests. Now, I suppose you know what will happen to you if we hand you over to the authorities?"

"Yes, Señor," answered the ruffian. "I shall probably be sentenced to six months' imprisonment with hard labour; which sentence will be commuted to one month, if I behave myself, as I shall, of course."

"Six months' hard labour?" exclaimed Carlos incredulously. "You are strangely mistaken, friend. You are far more likely to get ten years' penal servitude in Africa. Attempted murder is a crime that is usually punished very severely."

"Usually—yes," assented the prisoner. "But that is when one attempts to murder a Spaniard. This muchacho, however, is English; and nobody in Cuba is just now likely to trouble himself very much over the attempted murder of an Englishman. Besides, I have received a definite promise that, if caught, I shall be very leniently treated."

"Oh, you have, have you?" exclaimed Carlos, in a tone that seemed to indicate that he was beginning to see daylight. "That seems to point to the fact that your employer is a man possessing a considerable amount of influence with the authorities. But I fancy he must have entirely forgotten the British Consul at Havana. Does he, or do you, imagine for a moment that that gentleman will permit any tampering with justice where one of his countrymen is concerned? Make no mistake about that, my friend! So surely as you are brought to trial, so surely may you rely upon receiving the maximum amount of punishment for your crime."

"Santa Maria!" gasped Panza. "I had forgotten that."

"I suspected as much," answered Carlos. "Now, if Señor Singleton here should chance to be disposed to be merciful, to the extent of permitting you to go free, would you be willing in return to swear upon that crucifix which I see you wear round your neck that you will make no further attempt upon his life; and also to disclose the name of your employer?"

"That would be no good, Señor," said Panza. "My employer warned me that, should I attempt to betray him, he would simply deny every word I might say; and who would take the word of a suspected contrabandista against that of a—well, a Spaniard of high position? It is true that the judge might shrewdly suspect that there was a considerable amount of truth in my story; but he would be very careful to conceal any such suspicion, I assure you."

"It thus appears that your employer has taken the utmost care to shield himself behind you, and leave you to bear the brunt of whatever may befall," exclaimed Carlos. "But you have not replied to my question yet. I asked you whether, in the event of Señor Singleton permitting you to go free and unpunished, you would swear never again to lift your hand against him; and also to disclose the name of your employer. As a matter of fact, I know it already; but it would of course be more satisfactory to have an explicit statement from you."

"If you know the man, as you say, Señor, you will also know that it will not be of the slightest use to charge him with complicity in this," answered Panza.

"Possibly not," agreed Carlos. "Yet it would enable us to give Señor Alvaros a hint that his machinations are known, and that henceforth we shall be on our guard against them."

"Very well, Señor," agreed the would-be assassin. "You have named the man who employed me; it is therefore evident that you know a great deal more about this affair—whatever it may be—than he suspects, so it is useless for me to attempt to keep the secret from you. Señor Alvaros is indeed the man who employed me; but I am not going to be such a fool as to go back and tell him that I have failed. I insisted upon receiving payment in advance, and there is therefore no need for me to see him again; I shall consequently leave Pinar del Rio, and resume my former occupation of contrabandista. With Señor Alvaros' fifty doubloons I can see my way to earn a very comfortable living as a smuggler; and if you, Señor, should at any time require my services in that capacity—or any other, for that matter—I shall be pleased to do my utmost to afford you complete satisfaction."

"Very well, I will remember," said Carlos, laughing heartily at the man's cool impudence. "But you have not yet taken the oath, you know, and you must do that before we can release you."

Without a word of objection the Spaniard took the small bronze crucifix in his hand, bowed his head reverently as he pressed it to his lips, and then, holding it aloft before him, exclaimed:

"I swear upon this emblem of our redemption, and by all my hopes of salvation, that I will never again attempt to take the life of the young Englishman, if he will be so generous as to allow me to go free and unpunished for what I have already done."

"Right, that will do! You are free to go, now, as soon as you please. Open the door, Milsom, and let him pass," said

Jack.

"Mil gracias y buenas noches, Señor," exclaimed Panza as he strode toward the door. "One word before I go, caballeros; beware of Señor Alvaros, for he bears no love for either of you."

And he passed into the night and the darkness.

"Well," exclaimed Milsom, "I have met with some queer folk in my time, but that chap breaks the record for cool impudence! Spanish is not my strong point, but, if I understood him aright, after calmly acknowledging that he had been hired to murder our friend Jack, here, he with equal calmness informs you that if you should at any time want a similar job done, he will be pleased to undertake it, and will do his best to afford you complete satisfaction! 'Murders of the most barbarous description undertaken, and executed with promptitude and dispatch', eh? By Jove, this is an interesting country!"

Carlos laughed rather bitterly. "Yes, it is, isn't it?" he responded. "And it has come to this under Spanish rule. That fellow knew perfectly well that, in accepting Alvaros' commission, he was incurring absolutely no risks whatever, beyond such small personal danger as was involved in his attack upon a sleeping man, and that is not much, as a rule. But the incident goes to show what a vindictive and unscrupulous scoundrel that fellow Alvaros is. I must tell the Padre about it to-morrow, for it is evident that the man means mischief, and we must all be on our guard. The worst of it is that we can take no overt steps in the matter; for, as our friend Panza hinted, if we were to go to the authorities with a statement of what has occurred, and lodge a complaint against Alvaros, we should only be laughed at. The Spanish Government protects its own people pretty effectually; but Cubans and foreigners have to take care of themselves as best they can."

"Nevertheless," said Milsom, "I should advise Jack to put the matter into the hands of our Consul at Havana, who is not at all the sort of fellow to stand any nonsense. He would doubtless communicate promptly with the Capitan-General, informing him of what has happened, and giving him very clearly to understand that he will be held responsible if, after receiving such information, anything is allowed to happen to Jack."

"Yes," assented Carlos, "that might be a good plan, perhaps. But I would suggest that you decide upon nothing until we have had a talk with the Padre to-morrow. Let us hear, first, what he thinks of the affair. Meanwhile, Jack, I think you need not apprehend any further molestation to-night, and certainly none from Panza; after swearing that oath he will not again raise his hand against you. But, to make assurance doubly sure, I will rouse Pedro and instruct him to mount guard under the veranda for the remainder of the night, and to turn loose the two bloodhounds. Then woe betide any stranger who attempts to approach the house!"

On the following morning, after first breakfast, Carlos and Jack followed Don Hermoso into his office, where the former informed his father of the incident of the preceding night, and of Milsom's suggestion that the matter should be placed in the hands of the English Consul, to be dealt with as that official might deem fit. Don Hermoso was of course, as might be expected, most indignant at the outrage, and was at first very strongly disposed to make a personal matter of it by lodging a formal complaint with the Capitan-General against Alvaros; but after listening to all that his son and Jack had to say he finally allowed himself to be dissuaded from taking so decisive a step, especially as he fully shared their doubts as to its effectiveness: but he cordially approved of Milsom's suggestion that the affair should be laid before the English Consul, and the final result of the talk was that Jack and Carlos forthwith rode into Pinar del Rio, and from thence took train to Havana, where they arrived rather late in the afternoon, yet still early enough to catch the Consul ere he left his office for the day. This official gave the two young men a cordial welcome, and listened to Jack's story with the utmost attention, his mouth setting ever more firmly and the frown upon his brow lowering ever more darkly as the story proceeded. When at length it was finished he said:

"I have heard of this man Alvaros before, but never any good of him. Yet I believe he stands well with the Capitan-General. But of course I shall not allow that to influence me; one of my duties here is to protect British subjects, and I intend to do it. It is rather unfortunate, Mr Singleton, that you should have chosen this particular period for your visit to Cuba, for I may tell you—if you don't happen to know it already—that foreigners of all kinds, and particularly Americans and English, are looked upon with scant favour by the Spaniards just now, as the latter suspect them of favouring the aspirations of the Cubans toward independence. And that reminds me that the Spaniards somehow got hold of the notion that you were bringing out a cargo of contraband of war for the Cuban insurgents. I suppose there is no truth in that story, is there?"

Jack had been expecting some such question as this, sooner or later, and was fully prepared for it. He had made up his mind that to tell the Consul the whole truth of the matter would only be to place that official in an extremely embarrassing position, so he answered, with a laugh:

"They took good care to test the truth of the story for themselves by sending out a torpedo boat to accompany us from Key West and see that we did not land anything of the kind. But something went wrong with her—she apparently broke down—and we left her. But, to make assurance doubly sure, they also sent out a gunboat which—quite unlawfully, in my opinion—stopped us on the high seas, and informed us that we were all prisoners." Then Jack went on to relate in full detail all the occurrences of that afternoon—how Milsom had refused to surrender the yacht, and had threatened to sink the gunboat if force were attempted, and how he, Jack, had subsequently insisted upon the yacht being searched, and how nothing had been found, to the intense disappointment and chagrin of the Spanish officers, from whom he had exacted an ample apology.

The Consul's brow cleared, and he laughed heartily as Jack described in graphic language the entire incident, from beginning to end; and when the story was ended he was pleased to express a somewhat qualified approval of the Englishmen's behaviour.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "the whole affair was in the highest degree irregular. On the one hand, the Spaniards

had no business to stop you on the high seas, whatever their suspicions may have been; and in so doing they exceeded their rights and laid themselves open to the rebuff which you gave them. On the other hand, although I do not blame you altogether for your somewhat high-handed action in offering resistance to their attempted seizure of your vessel, it would have been more politic on your part to have submitted, and then placed the whole affair in my hands. I would have seen to it that no harm befell you; and I would also have exacted from the Government an ample apology and adequate compensation for the outrage. However, that is all past and done with; but I have no doubt you will be quite able to follow me when I point out to you that such an incident is, in itself, quite sufficient to render you a somewhat unpopular personage with the Spanish officials, and to cause them to regard with scarcely veiled disapproval your avowed intention to prolong your visit to the island. I tell you candidly that you must be quite prepared to have your stay in Cuba rendered as unpleasant as it can possibly be made; and I ought to advise you to make that stay as brief as possible. But if you choose to remain I will do my utmost to protect you; and I can guarantee you freedom from official interference so long as you abstain from meddling with politics. But of course I cannot insure you against private malignity, such as that of this fellow Alvaros; the utmost that I can promise is that, should anything untoward happen to you, I will exact ample reparation. I shall make it my business to call upon the Capitan-General to-morrow, and will not only lay the whole case before him, but will also insist upon his taking some steps to mark his disapproval of Captain Alvaros' peculiar methods of venting his personal spite. And now, since you cannot possibly get back to Señor Montijo's place to-night, I think perhaps you cannot do better than come home with me; I can put you both up quite easily."

Thus it was accordingly arranged; and after dinner their genial host took the two young men out and showed them something of the town of Havana, which was very interesting to Jack, although less so to Carlos, who was of course tolerably familiar with the place. They also took the opportunity to pay a flying visit to the *Thetis*, which they found moored just off the custom-house, still with four customs officers on board; but the other precaution mentioned by Milsom had been relaxed, for it was gradually being borne in upon the minds of the Spanish officials that there was nothing about the ship, or about the behaviour of her people, to justify their suspicions. Everything was found quite right on board her: Perkins took care to keep everybody on the alert, a strict anchor watch was maintained every night, to guard against any possible attempt to maliciously damage the ship; and it appeared that, before leaving her, Milsom had taken care to have the bunkers filled to their utmost capacity, while Macintyre, the chief engineer, after having had the boilers thoroughly cleaned, had caused them to be filled with fresh water in readiness to get up steam at a moment's notice.

On the following morning the Consul called upon the Capitan-General, taking the two lads with him, and lodged a formal, but none the less vigorous, complaint respecting the outrage which had been offered to a British subject—Jack, to wit—by one of his officers. The Capitan-General, who was a fine, stately, white-haired man, listened with the most courteous attention to what the two Englishmen had to say, and then, with equal courtesy, proceeded to pooh-poo the whole story, insisting upon the exceeding unlikelihood of any officer of Captain Alvaros' standing in the Spanish service stooping to so degrading and cowardly a step as that of hiring an assassin to "remove" an almost total stranger from his path. He dwelt very strongly upon the sterling worth of Señor Alvaros' character, and the very high esteem in which that gentleman was held by all who enjoyed the privilege of his acquaintance; and mildly reproached the Englishmen for being so credulous as to believe the unsupported story of such an unmitigated ruffian as Panza had appeared to be. The fact that the character of a Spanish officer and gentleman could be so easily smirched was dwelt upon by him at some length, but more in sorrow than in anger; and he did not omit to draw the especial attention of his visitors to the important fact that, even according to their own showing, there was no sufficient motive to induce Señor Alvaros to engage in such a very reprehensible undertaking.

It was intensely amusing to Jack, and scarcely less so to Carlos, to observe the sympathetic courtesy with which the English Consul listened to all this rigmarole, which, from his manner, one might have believed to have been absolutely convincing—until he remarked, in turn:

"Well, my dear General, after all has been said, one fact remains; which is, that Señor Singleton's life has been attempted by a man whom he never saw before, and who could therefore have had no personal animus against him. The obvious inference therefore is that he was hired by someone to make the attempt; and he asserts that the man who hired him was Señor Alvaros. Therefore, notwithstanding all that you have said, if anything further of an untoward nature should happen to Señor Singleton, I warn you that very grave suspicion will attach to Señor Alvaros, and I shall be compelled to insist upon the most stringent enquiry being made into the matter. I would therefore suggest—if you will pardon me for taking so great a liberty—that Señor Alvaros should be made aware of all the circumstances of the case; and that a hint should be given him of the extreme necessity for the utmost circumspection on his part. And now, General, I must offer you my most sincere apologies for having occupied so much of your valuable time, and tender you my warmest thanks for the great patience and courtesy with which you have listened to what I have had to say. Good-morning!"

Chapter Nine.

An urgent appeal for help.

The two young men reached the casa Montijo, that afternoon, in just nice time to partake of "afternoon tea", which function had promptly been adopted by Señora Montijo and her daughter upon the return of Don Hermoso and Carlos from England, as the very latest and most up-to-date institution, and absolutely indispensable in every household having the slightest pretensions to be considered as belonging to polite society. They related, *in extenso*, the result of their visit to Havana, at which no one was surprised, since everything had happened precisely as had been expected; but all were agreed that, after the very strong representations made by the English Consul, Jack need have very little apprehension of further annoyance from Alvaros. Then Singleton mentioned their impromptu visit to the yacht, and expressed to Milsom his great satisfaction at the state in which he had found both the vessel and her crew; and this, in turn, led to a further discussion of Jack's proposal that the entire family should indulge in a cruise,

instead of allowing the craft to remain idle in harbour, fouling her bottom with weed, and impairing the efficiency of her crew. It now appeared that the original suggestion had very powerfully appealed to the imagination of the ladies, who had kept it pretty persistently before Don Hermoso, until he, worthy man, finding nothing very convincing to advance against it, had been gradually brought into a frame of mind that needed very little further persuasion to induce him to give it his willing assent. Accordingly, before the evening was over, the matter had been gone into in earnest, and arrangements completed for a start in about a week's time; with the result that Milsom set out for Havana immediately after first breakfast on the following morning, for the purpose of making preparations.

The week passed, and the arrangements of the family had so far advanced that their heavy baggage, dispatched in advance, was actually on its way to Havana, for shipment on board the yacht, and was to be followed by the family and Jack on the following day, when toward the end of the afternoon a horseman dashed up to the door of the house, his clothing thick with dust and his horse reeking with sweat, and demanded instant audience with Señor Montijo on business of the utmost importance; and his demand was enforced by the utterance of a password which secured his prompt admission, Don Hermoso being at the moment engaged in his office, where he was completing with his overseer the final arrangements to be observed in his absence.

Ten minutes later Don Hermoso sent a servant in search of Jack and Carlos, who, with Doña Isolda, had gone for a stroll up the ravine; and when the two young men, having been found, entered Don Hermoso's sanctum they discovered him in close conference with the aforesaid dust-stained stranger, who proved to be a Cuban half-breed named Jorge Carnero. This man, Don Hermoso explained, was the bearer of a letter from Señor Marti, the leader of the revolutionary movement in Cuba, calling upon Don Hermoso to assist him in a serious difficulty that had most unexpectedly arisen. It appeared, according to Marti's letter, that the Junta established in New York had, with the assistance of certain rich and sympathetic Americans, collected an enormous quantity of arms, ammunition, and stores of every description, which they had shipped on board a shallow-draught steamer named the *James B. Potter*, with the intention of having them landed in Mulata Bay, some fourteen miles to the westward of Bahia Honda. Everything had gone admirably with the arrangements, up to a certain point: the steamer had succeeded in getting to sea without being stopped; a pilot was on board who was perfectly acquainted with the dangerous coast where the landing was to be effected; and every possible contingency in connection with the landing and prompt conveyance inland of the munitions had been provided for, when, at the very last moment, it had been discovered that the Spanish authorities were perfectly aware of the whole scheme, and had laid their plans for a torpedo boat to pounce upon the ship at the very moment when, two days later, the steamer would appear off the coast and enter the bay at which the landing of the munitions was to be effected. The messenger, Jorge Carnero—whose absolute fidelity to the cause of Free Cuba Marti guaranteed—was the man who had discovered the Spaniards' knowledge of the expedition and their arrangement for quashing it at the psychological moment; and he had been sent on to Montijo, as bearer of Marti's letter asking for help, in order that he might personally give Don Hermoso all the information possible. Marti's only hope was that Señor Montijo might be able to dispatch his yacht to intercept the *James B. Potter*, and warn her of the danger that lay ahead, thus saving the ship and cargo from what must otherwise be inevitable capture. "That," said Don Hermoso, in conclusion, "is the story, Jack. The question now is: Can you devise any plan by which this terrible disaster to our cause may be averted, and the cargo saved to us?"

"When, do you say, is this steamer timed to arrive in Mulata Bay?" demanded Jack.

Don Hermoso referred to Señor Marti's letter, and then replied: "At mid-day, on the day after to-morrow."

"Ah!" said Jack. "That does not allow us very much time, does it? Of course, by leaving here this evening, and spending the night in Pinar del Rio—by which means we could catch the first train to Havana to-morrow morning—we should be enabled to get to sea in very good time to intercept the *James B. Potter* somewhere in the Strait of Florida; and it may be advisable for us to arrange our plans accordingly, although I am afraid our proceeding to sea to-morrow will revive and greatly strengthen all the Spaniards' former suspicions of us, especially if the *James B. Potter* should afterwards fail to turn up at her rendezvous at the appointed time. Still, if necessary, we must risk that, rather than permit the ship and cargo to be captured. Do you happen to know where the torpedo boat is lying that is to effect the capture?" he demanded, turning to Carnero.

"Yes, Señor," answered Carnero; "she is torpedo boat Number 19, and she is lying in Havana harbour, from which she is to sally forth at the proper moment and conceal herself behind one of the cays lying just to the westward of Mulata Bay, where she will await the approach of the American ship."

"A very pretty scheme, and one that is exceedingly likely to succeed—if we do not interfere," commented Jack. "Are there any other Government vessels in Havana harbour?" he asked, turning again to Carnero.

"Yes, Señor, certainly," answered Carnero. "There are two others: the *Tiburón* gunboat, and the cruiser *Infanta Isabel*."

"Any steam tugs, or craft of any kind, capable of taking a few soldiers on board and running them round to Mulata Bay?" demanded Jack.

"Yes, Señor," answered Carnero, "there is the *Ballena*; but she is at present hauled up on the slips for repairs, and her boiler is out, so she need not be considered."

"And are those which you have named all that the Government has at its disposal?" persisted Jack.

"Yes, Señor," answered Carnero. "There are, of course, trading steamers sailing out of Havana, which the Government might requisition, in case of need; but—now, let me consider—yes, it happens that on the day after to-morrow not a single steamer will be in port; and the first that may be expected is due to arrive at midnight of that day."

"Good!" exclaimed Jack. "Then I think I can see my way. We will do better than go out to intercept the American, Don

Hermoso; we will render it impossible for either of those three Government craft to go out of harbour on that day. But when the authorities find their three steamers disabled, they may take it into their heads to throw a few soldiers on board a sailing craft of some sort and send her out to endeavour to capture the *James B. Potter*; therefore you had better send word to the people who are to receive the goods that, while they need not fear a warship of any kind, they had better be prepared to fight a few soldiers, if necessary."

"Certainly, that can be managed without difficulty," answered Don Hermoso. "But let us hear your plan, Jack. Our friend Carnero, here, is absolutely trustworthy, therefore you may speak without reserve before him; and if he knows what we intend to do, he will be able to tell others, who will know just what is to happen, and what they will have to provide for."

"Very well," said Jack. "This is my plan. You will remember how neatly we doctored the torpedo boat that followed us to sea from Key West? Well, I simply propose to treat the three Government craft in Havana harbour in the same way, only more so. That is to say, I propose, either by fouling their propellers or otherwise, to prevent them from going to sea at all on that day, or until their propellers are cleared; and that, I think, ought to give the American ship time to run in, discharge her cargo, and get to sea again without molestation. But, in order to do this, it will be necessary that we—or at all events I—should go into Pinar del Rio to-night, in order to catch either the last train to-night or the first train to-morrow to Havana. Perhaps it will look less suspicious if I go alone to-night and you follow on at your leisure to-morrow."

"If you are particularly anxious to reach Havana to-night, Señor, it can be done," exclaimed Carnero. "I know a short cut from here that will take us to Pinar within the hour, if you are a good horseman. But, to do it, we must start almost at once."

"I am ready now," said Jack, "and as to horsemanship—well, I have hunted over some pretty stiff country in England, which ought to be good enough. Carlos, old man, will you see to bringing along my bag with you to-morrow?"

"The Padre will, Jack, of course; but, as for me, I go with you to-night, for I have a notion that I can be useful in the carrying out of this scheme of yours. What say you, Padre?"

"I say, go, by all means, my son, if Jack thinks that you will be of the slightest use to him," answered Don Hermoso. "As for your bags, and so on, I will of course take care that they shall go forward with us to-morrow."

"Very well, then," said Jack, "in that case let Carlos go with me, for I cannot tell but that we may be glad enough to have him with us during our operations to-morrow. And now I suppose we had better see about making a start. What about horses, Carlos?"

"I will go and give instructions to have them saddled forthwith," answered the latter; and he rose and went out to the patio, Jack meanwhile making a few final arrangements as to the hour and place of meeting on the morrow in Havana.

Five minutes later the horses were brought round to the front of the house, and the young men, having meanwhile said a word or two of explanation to the ladies and bidden them temporarily adieu, mounted, and, accompanied by Carnero as guide, cantered off down the long path leading to the main road. But ere they reached this their guide turned off to the right, and, following a path that led through the tobacco fields, took them over the fence that formed one of the boundaries of Don Hermoso's property, and the party found themselves in the open country, over which Carnero led them in a bee-line, taking brooks, watercourses, and obstructions of various kinds as they came. The pace of the riders was by no means rapid, nothing more than a brisk canter, in fact, but, the route taken being practically the shortest possible distance between Señor Montijo's hacienda and Pinar del Rio, the journey was accomplished in little over an hour; and when at length they pulled up at the railway station they had a good four minutes in hand.

"All right, Señores!" said Carnero, as he received the bridles of the two horses, "I will see that the nags are properly rubbed down and attended to, and that they shall be in readiness to go back with the coach and the servants to-morrow. Adios, Señores; luck go with you!"

The clocks in the city were just striking ten when, after a somewhat tedious journey, the train clattered and jolted into the Western Station at Havana; and, jumping out, the lads chartered a volante—the local hansom, which is an open vehicle, mounted upon a pair of enormously high wheels, and fitted with such long shafts that it can only be turned with the utmost difficulty in the narrow streets—and drove down to the wharf, where they hired a shore boat to take them off to the yacht, which was lying moored to a pair of the trunk buoys in the harbour.

The ships' bells were chiming "five", that is to say, half-past ten, as the boat, after having been challenged by the anchor watch, swept alongside the *Thetis's* gangway ladder, and the two young men ascended to the deck. Somewhat to their surprise, they found Milsom on board; for, as they were not expected until the following day, they would not have been at all astonished to learn that the skipper was ashore, amusing himself at the theatre, or elsewhere. But Milsom explained that he had had enough of Havana: he had been to the theatre twice, and considered that it was not a patch upon the Alhambra in Leicester Square at home; he had been to the Cathedral, and had been shown the tomb of Christopher Columbus—the genuineness of which he greatly doubted; he had sauntered in the Alameda in the evenings, listening to the military bands, of which he thought nothing, and trying to discover a Spanish girl that could hold a candle to one of our own wholesome, handsome English lasses, and had failed; and he had also tried, and had failed, to determine the precise number of separate and distinct odours—"stinks", he called them—which go to make up the characteristic smell of Havana. From all of which it will be gathered that the worthy man, with the restlessness characteristic of the sailor, was beginning to weary of his inactivity—although during the past week he had been anything but inactive, it may be mentioned—and was pining for something fresh in the way of excitement. It appeared that, finding himself with spare time on his hands

notwithstanding his preparation of the yacht for the projected trip, he had amused himself by designing an elaborate disguise for the craft, under the impression that a time might very possibly arrive when such a disguise would be found exceedingly useful; and he proudly produced a sketch of the said disguise which, when unfolded before the astonished gaze of the two young men, showed the *Thetis* transmogrified into something resembling a two-funnelled torpedo gunboat, with ram stem and round, spoon-shaped stern all complete. It was a contraption most ingeniously built up of wood and canvas by the joint efforts and skill of Milsom, Macintyre, and the carpenter; and was so handily contrived that, according to the statement of its inventor or designer, given fine weather and smooth water for four hours, the vessel's appearance could be so completely changed that "her own mother wouldn't know her."

Having duly admired Milsom's ingenuity, Jack explained in detail the reason why he and Carlos had advanced the time of their arrival, and disclosed his scheme for the temporary disablement of the three men-o'-war in the harbour, into which scheme Milsom entered with the utmost gusto, even going to the length of rousing poor Macintyre out of his berth and ruthlessly breaking in upon his beauty sleep, in order that the parties might have the benefit of the chief engineer's advice and assistance. And when at length the little band of conspirators broke up at midnight and turned in, the plan of campaign had been arranged, down to the last detail.

After all, there was not very much to be done in the way of preparation; a couple of hours' work next day by Macintyre and his crew at the portable forge down in the stokehold, and everything was ready for the work which was to commence as soon as possible after ten o'clock that night. There was only one difficulty that still remained to be overcome, and that was the evading of the vigilance of the custom-house officers, who still remained on board the yacht. It is true that that vigilance had been very greatly relaxed of late, since it had been borne in upon even their limited intelligence that nothing remotely resembling an attempt to smuggle anything ashore had ever been made; still, it would be awkward in the extreme if one or more of them should happen to be troubled with insomnia on that particular night, and elect to pass the sleepless hours on deck: but Don Hermoso might be trusted to attend to that matter when he should arrive on board about four o'clock, or a little after, as he did, accompanied by Señora Montijo and Doña Isolda. The difficulty was explained to Don Hermoso during the progress of afternoon tea, which refreshment was partaken of on the top of the deck-house that adjoined the navigating bridge of the vessel; and after the meal was over, Carlos went ashore in the steam pinnace and brought off a small phial of liquid that looked and tasted like water. Then, the fact having been elicited from the chief steward that the custom-house officers had evinced a very marked preference for whisky over the aguardiente of their native land, a bottle of the former was opened and, half a wineglassful of the spirit having been poured from the bottle, a like quantity of the liquid from the phial was substituted for it, the cork replaced, and the bottle well shaken. It was then sent forward to the *empleados de la aduana* for their especial use, with the compliments of Don Hermoso, that they might drink his health and that of his family, and wish them a pleasant voyage, on this their last night on board, since the yacht would, weather permitting, go to sea some time on the morrow. Half an hour later the steward, with a knowing grin, reported to Milsom that the bottle was already three-parts empty.

"That is all right," commented Don Hermoso, when the statement was passed on to him; "the gentlemen of the customs will not be troubled with sleeplessness to-night!" Nor were they; for four bells in the first watch had scarcely struck when, with many yawns, they retired below and—those who were supposed to be on watch as well as those who were off—in ten minutes were sleeping like logs.

"Now is our time, Phil, before the moon rises," exclaimed Jack, as soon as the report of the custom-house officers' retirement had been brought aft by the chief steward. "It is important to get the submarine into the water unobserved; but, that done, we can wait until midnight, or even later, before commencing operations. By that time everybody will have turned in; and moreover we shall have the light of the moon to help us."

Accordingly, the canvas cover was removed from the particular boat in which the small submarine was hidden, and the mischievous little toy was carefully hoisted out, lowered into the water, submerged until only the top of her diminutive conning tower showed above water, and then effectually concealed by being moored to the boat boom, between the gig and the steam pinnace. Then advantage was taken of the darkness to pass down into her everything that had been prepared for the success of the forthcoming enterprise; after which everybody turned in, except Carlos, who undertook to keep a watch on deck until everything should seem sufficiently quiet in the harbour to admit of the adventurers beginning their work without incurring undue risk of detection.

At length two bells in the middle watch (one o'clock) pealed out from the various ships in the harbour; the moon, just past the full, was riding high in the cloudless sky and affording quite as much light as the adventurers desired; and not a sound was to be heard save the faint moan of the wind in the rigging of the various craft in the harbour and the lap of the water alongside: everybody seemed to have gone to bed, except the anchor watch on board the men-o'-war—and they would probably lie down and endeavour to snatch a cat-nap until the moment should come round to again strike the bell. Carlos therefore thought the time propitious; and, treading noiselessly in his rubber-soled deck shoes, went below and quietly called Jack, Milsom, and Macintyre.

Macintyre was the first of the trio to appear on deck, for, his business being in the interior of the boat, he had no special dress to don; the pyjama suit in which he had been sleeping would serve as well as any other, and he accordingly wore it. Walking forward with bare feet, he slung himself over the rail, lay out on the boom, and, sliding down the painter of the steam pinnace, got on board that craft—as a "blind" to anyone who might perchance happen to have noticed his movements—and from thence surreptitiously transferred himself to the interior of the submarine—having already cast the boat adrift—which he immediately sealed by fastening down the hood of the little conning tower. Then he set the electric air-pump going, in order to store up for himself a supply of air sufficient to last until the return of the boat. And while this was doing he quietly dropped the boat astern until she lay in the deep shadow cast by the overhanging counter of the yacht, where the other two could board her without the slightest risk of being seen.

Some ten minutes later Jack and Milsom appeared on deck, each attired in an improved Fleuss diving dress, by the use of which the necessity for air-pumps and pipes was done away with. Each man wore a long, stout, double-edged

dagger in a sheath attached to his belt, as a protection against possible attacks by sharks, with which the waters of the harbour are known to swarm; while Milsom bore, in addition, a formidable lance for the same purpose, or, rather, for the purpose of protecting Jack while the latter worked. And each man wore, attached to his wrist by a lanyard, a small, light steel bar, about four inches long, to enable him to communicate with his companion—by means of the Morse code—by the simple process of tapping on his helmet. They also carried, attached to their belts, small but very powerful electric lanterns, the light of which they could switch on and off at will, to enable them to see what they were about. They had made all their arrangements during the previous day, and had exchanged a few brief last words just before screwing in the front glasses of their helmets. Each therefore knew exactly what he and his companion had to do, and they now accordingly proceeded straight aft, found the Jacob's ladder hanging over the yacht's stern, and by it descended to the submarine, Milsom going first and stationing himself on the boat's deck just abaft the conning tower, while Jack took the corresponding place on the fore side.

The weight of the two men was sufficient to just submerge the boat and bury them to their chins when sitting down, while they could disappear altogether by lying flat on the deck. The degree of submersion, therefore, was just right for the beginning of the adventure, and Jack accordingly signalled Macintyre, by means of an electric button, first to back away from the yacht, and then to go ahead dead slow, guiding him at the same time how to steer by means of another button.

The torpedo boat, being the most formidable of the three craft, was selected as the first to be operated upon, and the submarine was accordingly headed for her. The water of Havana harbour is unspeakably foul, the sewers of the town discharging into it, and it is almost opaque with the quantity of matter of various kinds that it holds in suspension; it was therefore necessary for the submarine to approach the torpedo boat pretty closely ere sinking any deeper, or it would have been difficult for the adventurers to find their prey in the muddy water, but they managed excellently, approaching within ten yards without being detected. Then Jack, unwilling to court failure by running any unnecessary risks, gave the order to sink slowly, at the same time turning on his electric lamp. Another moment, and he saw the torpedo boat's stern and propeller before him, and the submarine, magnificently managed by Macintyre, who had worked her in all her previous trials, drew gently up until she stopped motionless in such a position that Jack could do just what he wanted. He had decided not to attempt to remove the propeller in this case, lest the violent exertion required to start the nut should cause him to overbalance and fall to the bottom of the harbour, in which case he would inevitably be lost in the deep layer of foul mud which formed the harbour bottom. He therefore took a length of stout chain, already prepared for the purpose, and, having first carefully wound it round the three blades of the boat's propeller, passed the loose ends round the keel bar and rudder where, having drawn them as tight as he and Milsom could draw them, he shackled them together, thus rendering it impossible to move the boat until the chain had been found and taken off. The whole job occupied them a bare quarter of an hour, and could have been done in less had it not been for the hindrance which they experienced from the fish, which—sharks luckily excepted—attracted by their lamps, swarmed round them so persistently that it was almost impossible to do any work for the obstruction of them.

The cruiser was the next craft to be dealt with, and, after her, the gunboat; the whole operation of disabling the three vessels being accomplished with almost ludicrous ease in about an hour and a quarter: after which the adventurers returned to the yacht and hoisted in the submarine, stowing her away and concealing her in the quarter boat, without, so far as they were aware, having attracted the attention of a single soul.

Chapter Ten.

The act of "Certain very clever conspirators."

When, on the following morning, the saloon party on board the *Thetis* mustered for breakfast beneath the awning which sheltered the top of the deck-house from the too-ardent rays of the sun, they found that their alfresco breakfast-room commanded an uninterrupted and most charming view of the whole of Havana harbour, with the picturesque old town stretching along the waterside on their port hand. It was at that moment a dead calm, for the sea breeze had not yet set in, and the mirrorlike surface of the water reflected a perfect picture of the various craft dotted about the harbour, and of the buildings ashore, already blazing in the dazzling light of the unclouded sun. The business of the day had hardly begun; the ferryboats to Regla were loaded with passengers; boats conveying meat, vegetables, fruit, and fish to the shipping were lazily rippling through the scum that coated the surface of the water; belated fishermen were sweeping their crazy-looking craft out to sea; and a thin column of brown smoke was rising vertically into the motionless air from the funnel of torpedo boat Number 19, which was evidently getting up steam in good time to go in search of the *James B. Potter*. But for the awning over their heads the party would also have seen that a thin, feathery film of smoke was curling upward from the cream-coloured funnel of their own craft; for although it had been decided not to go to sea until the afternoon, Jack had given instructions to have steam for ten o'clock, so as to be prepared for any emergency.

The party dawdled over breakfast, the ladies in particular finding so much pleasure in their unwonted surroundings that they could scarcely find time to eat because of the many novel incidents that were continually demanding their attention. Moreover, they were in the enviable condition of people who were in no hurry: their preparations were all complete; nothing remained to be done or to worry about; they were embarked upon a pleasure excursion, and part of the pleasure was to sit still and gaze upon the increasing animation of the charming picture that unfolded itself around them. When they were tired of gazing, a word was all that would be necessary to provide them with a change of scene; and meanwhile Jack was entertaining them all with a humorous account of the adventures of himself and Milsom during the small hours of the morning. Milsom, having already broken his fast, had taken the steam pinnace and gone ashore to the custom-house (which had once been a church) in order to procure his clearance papers. By the time that he had finished his business and come off again, breakfast was over, the stewards were clearing away the table and its equipage, and the movements of the torpedo boat's crew were becoming interesting. A dense cloud of black smoke was by this time pouring from the craft's funnel and driving over the town with the rapidly increasing

sea breeze, and presently a small flicker of steam appeared at the top of her waste pipe, and a minute or two later it was seen that the craft was getting her anchor.

"Ah," remarked Jack to Señorita Isolda, "the fun is just about to begin!"

And so it was. The anchor, thickly coated with foul, evil-smelling, black mud, rose slowly out of the water; and as the cleansing hose was turned upon it the officer on the bridge was seen to lay his hand upon the engine-room telegraph and push the handle a little way forward.

Don Hermoso, who, despite all Jack's assurances, felt terribly anxious lest, after all, something should at the last moment go wrong, looked fearfully at the little craft's stern, expecting every instant to see the foaming whirl of water there which would proclaim that the boat's propeller was working; but, save for a very slight momentary disturbance of the scummy surface, there was no result, and presently a very excited individual was seen to emerge from the boat's engine-room hatch and rush up on to the bridge, where he instantly plunged into a violently gesticulatory conversation with the other occupant of the structure. Then the pair left the bridge, hurried aft, and disappeared below. Meanwhile the boat was adrift, and presently, under the influence of the fast-freshening breeze, she drove athwart-hawse of a slashing American schooner, the stout bowsprit of which neatly brought the boat's funnel down on deck, to the accompaniment of a storm of abuse and imprecations from the American skipper and mate. Then, swinging round and gathering sternway, the boat drifted clear, losing her mast also in the process, after which, somebody on board having recovered his presence of mind, her anchor was let go again, and she swung to the wind.

That this interesting little incident had not passed unnoticed was presently made manifest by the excited flourishings and gesticulations of the semaphore upon the bridge of the cruiser, to which the torpedo boat's semaphore duly made reply. Then a boat was lowered from the latter craft, and two officers—presumably her commander and her chief engineer—jumped into her stern-sheets and were pulled toward the cruiser. Some ten minutes later the same boat pushed off again and returned to her parent craft, while the semaphore on board the cruiser once more awakened into frenzied activity, its message being this time addressed to the gunboat, as could be deduced from the answering nourishes of that vessel's instrument. The conversation lasted for quite a considerable time; and long ere it was at an end dense clouds of black smoke were pouring out of the funnel of Jack's old friend, the *Tiburón*.

Now, although all these happenings were being watched with the most absorbing interest from the top of the *Thetis's* deck-house, it must not be supposed that the watching was conducted in an obtrusive or ostentatious manner; very far from it. The occupants of that "coign of vantage", to whom Milsom was now added, were, so far as the ordinary observer was concerned, lounging indolently in their several basket chairs, reading, smoking, and chatting together, and apparently giving not a thought to anything that was happening outside the bulwarks of their own ship, save when, now and then, one of them would lift a pair of binoculars and bring them to bear upon some object ashore, ultimately sweeping the entire horizon with them, and pausing for a moment to watch this or that before laying them down again. Nobody, even if watching the party continuously, would, from their actions, have suspected them of taking the smallest interest in the doings of the Spanish Government vessels.

Yet there was not a movement on board either the cruiser or the gunboat—the torpedo boat was *hors de combat* and of no further interest to them—that was not being intensely watched by Milsom and Jack; and presently the latter turned to Carlos and enquired:

"Got a pencil and paper about you, old chap?"

"Yes," answered Carlos; "I have my pocket-book. Why?"

"Then just stand by to jot down such letters as I may call out to you. That gunboat's semaphore is at work again, and I feel curious to know what it is that she wants to say. Ah! just so; it is the cruiser she wants to talk to. Now, stand by."

The cruiser having acknowledged the "call", the *Tiburón's* semaphore began spelling out a message, each letter of which Jack read off and called out as it was signalled. When the message came to an end Carlos read it out and translated it into English. It ran as follows:—

"Fear there is something wrong with my engines also. Have tried to turn them by hand, aided by forty-five pounds of steam, and cannot move them more than an inch or so either way."

The cruiser had no reply to make to this disquieting piece of information; but a minute or two later four sailors ran out upon her boat boom and climbed down the Jacob's ladder hanging therefrom into one of the boats, which they cast off and paddled to the gangway ladder, where two officers were by this time waiting. These two individuals at once stepped into the boat, which thereupon was shoved off and pulled alongside the gunboat.

"A lieutenant and one of the engineers from the cruiser gone aboard to investigate," commented Milsom. "Now, keep your eye on the gunboat's semaphore, Jack; we shall probably get a little further interesting information presently."

They did not, however, for the gunboat's semaphore remained dumb. But the two visitors from the cruiser presently re-appeared, tumbled down over the side into their boat, and were rapidly rowed back to their own ship. Ten minutes later a stream of smoke began to issue first from one and then from the other funnel of the cruiser. It was evident that they had started to get steam on board her in a hurry. And indeed the time had arrived for hurry; for it was now five bells in the forenoon watch, and the *James B. Potter* was timed to arrive in Mulata Bay at eight bells—an hour and a half thence! She was probably off the harbour's mouth at that moment—or, if not off the harbour's mouth, at least in sight. The Morro Castle, with its signal staff, was not visible from the spot where the *Thetis* lay moored, being shut off from view by the eastern portion of the Old Town, but it could probably be seen from the cruiser, which was lying considerably farther down the harbour and farther over on the Regla side of it; and while the men folk on the top of the yacht's deck-house were still discussing the matter, Milsom's quick eye caught the cruiser's answering

pennant being hoisted in acknowledgment of a signal made to her from some unseen spot.

"Aha!" he exclaimed; "do you see that? I wouldn't mind betting my next allowance of grog that that is the acknowledgment of a signal from the Morro that the *Potter* is in sight! How can we find out, I wonder, without doing anything to arouse the suspicions of the Spanish Johnnies, that we are interested in the matter? If it were not for the suspicion that it would arouse, the simplest way, of course, would be to take the steamboat and run down as far as the harbour's mouth, when we could see for ourselves whether there is a steamer in sight. But it would never do; it would be rather too palpable."

"Cannot you tell by reading the cruiser's signals?" demanded Don Hermoso. "See, there are several flags being hoisted on board her now? What do they mean?"

"Quite impossible to tell, my dear sir, without possessing a copy of the Spanish Naval signal-book," answered Milsom. "Each navy has its own private code of signals, which no man can read unless he has access to the official signal-book. No; that is no good. Is there no spot ashore from which one can get a good view of the offing?"

"Nothing nearer, I am afraid, than Punta Brava; and that is quite two miles from the landing-place by the shortest possible cut," answered Don Hermoso. "One could not walk there and back in much less than an hour and a half, in this heat; and to drive there would, I am afraid, be almost as imprudent as running down to the harbour's mouth in the steam pinnace."

"Quite," answered Milsom. "But"—as he leaned out over the rail and glanced up at the yacht's funnel, which he could thus just see clear of the awning—"we might slip our moorings and go out in the yacht, if you like, Señor. I see that we have steam enough to move; and we are free to go to sea at any moment, now, you know."

"So I understand," answered Don Hermoso. "Yet I think we had better remain where we are a little longer; for I am anxious to assure myself, before starting on our trip, that the *Potter* has succeeded in landing her cargo and getting away safely. And if we were to go to sea just now we should be obliged to proceed on our voyage, I think; we could advance no good reason for hanging about outside and watching the movements of strange craft."

"No, no, of course not; I quite see your point," agreed Milsom. "It would undoubtedly be better to remain where we are for an hour or two longer, and see how the affair eventually develops. But I wouldn't mind betting that that signal had some reference to the American boat, for see how furiously they are firing up aboard the cruiser."

They were indeed firing up "furiously", as Milsom had said; for dense clouds of black smoke were now continuously pouring and billowing out of both funnels of the cruiser, to the outspoken scorn and derision of Macintyre, who had his own ideas upon the subject of "firing", his theory being that to make steam quickly, and keep it when made, one should "fire" lightly and continuously.

Meanwhile the preparations for going to sea were progressing apace aboard the cruiser, the boats being all hoisted in except one, which, with a couple of hands in her, was hanging on to the buoy to which the cruiser was moored, in readiness to unshackle the cable from the mooring ring so soon as the vessel had steam enough to enable her to move. The bells of the shipping in the harbour were chiming eight—which in this case meant noon—when the first white feather of steam began to play about the tops of the cruiser's steam pipes; and at the sight the watchers on board the yacht stirred in their chairs and assumed a more alert attitude, for further developments might now be looked for.

They came—within the next five minutes—the first of them being the sudden lowering of the captain's gig aboard the cruiser, the hurried descent of her crew into her by way of the davit tackles, and the hauling of her alongside the hastily lowered gangway. A moment later an officer stepped into the stern-sheets; and, with the naval ensign of Spain snapping in the breeze at her stern, and her boat pennant trailing from the staff in her bows, she shoved off and dashed away toward the landing steps, with her eight oarsmen bending their backs and making their good ash blades spring almost to breaking-point, as though their very lives depended upon their speed. She swept past the *Thetis* within a biscuit's toss, and the party on the top of that vessel's deck-house were not only able to distinguish, by the gold braid on his coat cuffs, that the solitary occupant of the stern-sheets held the rank of captain, but also that the poor man looked worried and scared almost out of his senses. Just before coming abreast of the yacht, which of course had her club ensign and burgee flying, the boat swerved slightly from her course, and for a moment it looked almost as though she intended to run alongside; but the next moment she straightened up again and went on her way toward the landing steps, the "brass bounder" in her stern just touching the peak of his uniform cap with his finger tips in acknowledgment of Jack's and Milsom's courtesy salute. Two minutes later her crew tossed oars and she swept up alongside the landing steps and hooked on; the skipper next moment springing up the steps and disappearing in the crowd of idlers who had gathered at the head of the steps.

Two bells came, and with it the stewards to lay the table for second breakfast, or luncheon, on the yacht's deck-house; and as three bells struck, the little party drew in round the "hospitable board" and sat down to their mid-day meal. They had just about finished when Milsom, who was sitting facing the town and wharf, put down his glass somewhat emphatically on the table, and, rising to his feet, exclaimed: "Now, what does this mean?"

"What does what mean?" demanded Jack, also rising to his feet and facing in the direction toward which the skipper was looking. "Phew!" he whistled; "the plot thickens! Surely it is not possible that we were seen last night, Phil, eh?"

"I could have sworn that we were not," answered Milsom. "Yet, if we were not, I repeat: What does this mean?"

He might well ask. For there, halfway between the wharf and the yacht, was the cruiser's boat, with the captain and an elderly gentleman in plain clothes in the stern-sheets; and it was unquestionable that they were making for the yacht. Jack snatched up a pair of binoculars that lay in one of the basket chairs and brought it to bear upon the boat. "Why," he exclaimed, "I'll be shot if it isn't the Capitan-General who is coming off to us!"

"The Capitan—General!" gasped Don Hermoso. "Then, depend on it, gentlemen, your movements were observed last night, and you have been informed upon. What will you do?"

"Why," answered Jack, "we will wait until we have heard what these people have to say; and then—be guided by circumstances. But—pooh! I believe we are scaring ourselves unnecessarily. If they suspected us of tampering with their ships it is not in a boat manned by six unarmed sailors that they would come off to us. Come along, Phil, you as skipper and I as owner of this vessel will go down to receive these gentlemen and learn what their business is with us."

And, so saying, and followed by Milsom, he descended to the main deck and stationed himself at the head of the gangway ladder, by which time the boat was alongside. Another moment and the Capitan-General, hat in hand, and bowing courteously to the two Englishmen, passed in through the gangway, followed by the captain of the cruiser.

"Good-day, Señor Singleton!" exclaimed the old gentleman genially, offering his hand. "Do you happen to remember me, or must I introduce myself?"

"I remember you perfectly well, of course, General," answered Jack, accepting the proffered hand with—it must be confessed—a feeling of very considerable relief, "and I am very glad indeed to have the honour of receiving you on board my yacht, although you have deferred your visit until the moment when we are about to proceed to sea."

"Ah, yes," answered the General, "so I guessed, from the steam which I see issuing from your vessel's funnel! It is about that that I have come off to see you. But, before we go any further, permit me to have the honour of introducing to you Captain Morillo, of His Spanish Majesty's cruiser the *Infanta Isabel*, which lies yonder."

The introduction having been made and acknowledged with all due formality, the old gentleman resumed:

"Now, a most extraordinary thing has happened here to-day—an occurrence so singular and unique that one is driven to the conviction that certain very clever conspirators have been at work." The old gentleman, whether by accident or designedly, looked Jack square in the eye as he said this; and it was with the utmost difficulty that the latter was able to keep his countenance and retain that nonchalance of demeanour and expression of polite interest which he felt was so necessary to avert any suspicion of his own complicity with the "very clever conspirators". To cover any indication of confusion which he might have inadvertently betrayed, he shouted to the quartermaster, who was busy about nothing in particular near the stern grating:

"Quartermaster, bring along four basket chairs." Then to the General:

"You interest me immensely, General. I have just sent for some chairs, and when they arrive we will sit and discuss the matter in comfort. Meanwhile, may I offer you and Captain Morillo a glass of wine? We have some very passable champagne down in our cold chamber."

The Capitan-General and his friend expressed themselves as perfectly willing to partake of Señor Singleton's gracious hospitality; and presently, seated at ease, and with a foaming glass of ice-cold Mumm before him, the Governor resumed his story.

"I need not ask you, Señor, whether you are aware that the present condition of Cuba is somewhat abnormal, for I feel convinced that a caballero of your intelligence must have long ere this discovered that the island is literally seething with rebellion—to such an extent, indeed, that a rising against Spanish rule may be anticipated at any moment. Nor need I point out to you how ruinously disastrous to the rebels and all who might be suspected of sympathising with them such a rising must necessarily be; for it would of course be my painful duty to suppress it by force of arms. It is therefore in the interest of the Cubans themselves that we are adopting certain measures for the prevention of everything of a nature calculated to encourage hope on the part of the native population that a rising against Spanish authority could by any possibility be successful; and one of these measures is the suppression of all importation of weapons and war material of every description."

"Quite so," concurred Jack with a smile. "We had an illustration of the vigour and thoroughness of your efforts in that direction upon our arrival on the coast, in the action taken by the Commander of the gunboat yonder, who was only convinced with the utmost difficulty that we were not engaged in the business of smuggling war material into the country. Indeed, I believe he never would have been convinced, had I not insisted upon his making a thoroughly exhaustive search of my vessel, with the result, of course, that nothing of the kind was to be found on board her."

The old gentleman flushed, fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair, and fortified himself by emptying his glass. He would rather not have been reminded of that circumstance, especially at that moment.

"Ah!" he said, shaking his head sorrowfully as he put down his empty glass and feigned to be oblivious of the fact that Jack promptly refilled it; "yes, that was a most regrettable occurrence—the result of a very unfortunate mistake on the part of certain friends of ours on the other side. I understand, however, that Commander Albuquerque made the *amende honorable* in a manner that was absolutely satisfactory to yourself, Señor; and, with the expression of my own personal profound regret, I trust that you will have the extreme generosity to allow the deplorable affair to be forgotten."

"Of course I will," said Jack heartily; "I am not one to bear malice. We are all liable to make mistakes at some time or other of our lives."

"Señor," exclaimed the General with enthusiasm, "I am indeed delighted to find you so generously disposed—the more so that my visit to you to-day is connected with a similar incident; the only difference being that, in this case, there is unfortunately no room for the belief that we are making a second mistake. We have received the most positive information that certain American sympathisers with the revolutionary movement in Cuba have loaded a

steamer with munitions of war for the use of the insurgents; and these munitions are to be landed to-day at a spot known as Mulata Bay, a few miles to the westward of this port. The information, most unfortunately, did not reach us in time to allow of our taking measures for the seizure of the cargo upon being landed; but that appeared, at the time, to be a matter of no moment, for I had planned to send a torpedo boat to seize the vessel and her cargo upon her arrival in Mulata Bay. The vessel, I may mention, was to have arrived at her destination at mid-day to-day; and, as a matter of fact, she has arrived, for she was sighted in the offing this morning, and has since been seen heading in toward the bay. And now we come to the explanation of my remark in reference to certain very clever conspirators; for when the torpedo boat attempted to leave the harbour this morning for the purpose of intercepting the smuggling ship, it was found that her machinery had been tampered with, so that it became impossible to send her. It was then decided to send the gunboat; but when she in turn attempted to move it was discovered that she also had been disabled. And finally, to cut my story short, it was discovered that the engines of Captain Morillo's ship had also been so effectually tampered with that she cannot move. Thus, you see, at a very critical moment, we find ourselves absolutely helpless; and unless something can be done, and that instantly, the cargo will be landed, with the deplorable result that an armed rebellion will break out in the island, and incalculable mischief will ensue."

"Yes," assented Jack thoughtfully; "I must confess that such a result seems not improbable."

"Not improbable!" ejaculated the General; "my dear sir, it is absolutely certain! We have the very best of reasons for knowing that, once the insurgents find themselves possessed of arms, they will lose not a moment in making a determined effort to throw off the yoke of Spanish rule, and the island will be at once plunged into all the horrors of war. Now, my dear Señor Singleton, it is in your power to avert those horrors, if you will!" ("Precisely!" thought Jack; "I could have bet that the old boy was leading up to this.") "You see exactly how we are situated. That American ship and her cargo must be seized; yet we have no ship available with which to effect the seizure. You, on the other hand, have a ship that is in every way admirably adapted for the service, and you have steam up; you can leave the harbour at a moment's notice, if you choose—"

"Pardon me, General," interrupted Jack; "I understand exactly what you are driving at: you want me to lend you this yacht for the purpose of conveying a party of soldiers or sailors to—to—"

"Mulata Bay," interpolated the General.

"Yes," continued Jack, "to Mulata Bay, to seize an American ship which, you say, is smuggling a cargo of contraband-of-war into the island! But, my dear sir, has the very extraordinary nature of your request yet dawned upon you? Do you recognise that you are asking me, a private English gentleman, to mix myself up in a quarrel with which I have absolutely nothing to do, and the rights and wrongs of which I do not in the least understand? Why should I interfere with an American ship, even though she be engaged, as you suggest, in affording aid and encouragement to the revolutionaries?"

"Surely, Señor, the reasons that I have already advanced ought to be sufficient," answered the General. "But if they are not, let me give you another. Your friend Don Hermoso Montijo, whom I see with his wife and family on the upper deck yonder, are not altogether free from the taint of suspicion of being in sympathy with the revolutionaries; indeed, it has been whispered to me that—but it would perhaps be unfair to them to repeat suggestions which have not as yet been absolutely proved: let it suffice for me to say that I wish the present predicament of my Government to be laid before them, together with the request which I have ventured to make to you; and let me know how they advise you in the matter."

"But, General, this is absolutely preposterous!" protested Jack. "Why should Don Hermoso Montijo and his family be dragged into the affair? And why should I be supposed to be governed by their advice? I must positively refuse to submit the matter to them in any shape or form; and I must also refuse to permit myself to be influenced by any advice which they might see fit to give. They are my guests on board this vessel, and, I may tell you, have embarked in her for the purpose of taking a cruise in her for the benefit of the health of the ladies of the family—indeed, we were on the point of getting under way when you boarded us."

"Señor," retorted the General, "I will not pretend to dispute any one of your statements; but I will simply say that if you persist in refusing your assistance to the Spanish Government in this strait, your refusal will have the effect of very greatly strengthening the suspicions that already exist as to the loyalty of the Montijo family!"

"General," exclaimed Jack, "if you did but know it you could scarcely have said anything better calculated to defeat your own wishes and make me declare that under no circumstances will I permit myself to be dragged into this business. To be perfectly frank with you, I do not believe that you have the slightest shadow of foundation or excuse for your suspicions of Señor Montijo and his family. But, in order to show you how little grounds there are for them—should such actually exist—I will do violence to my own feelings by acceding to your request, without consulting Señor Montijo in any way, to the extent of conveying a party of your men, not exceeding fifty, to Mulata Bay; upon condition that I am allowed to fly the Spanish man-o'-war ensign while engaged upon the service."

"Why do you attach that condition to your assent, Señor?" demanded the General.

"Because," snapped Jack, who was now perilously near losing his temper, "I neither can nor will do the work under the British flag!"

"I think, Excellency, Señor Singleton is justified in his demand," remarked the skipper of the cruiser, now speaking for the first time. "The work that he has kindly undertaken to do is essentially Spanish Government work, and can only be properly done under the Spanish flag. I will bring you a Spanish ensign and pennant to hoist, Señor, when I bring my men alongside," he added, turning to Jack.

"I shall be obliged, Señor, if you will," answered Jack; "for I will do nothing without them."

"Then that is settled," exclaimed the General, rising to his feet. "When will you be ready to leave the harbour, Señor Singleton?"

"As soon as Captain Morillo brings his men alongside," answered Jack.

"Then, to expedite matters, let us be going at once, Morillo," exclaimed the General. Then, turning to Jack, he said: "Señor, permit me to express to you the gratitude not only of myself, personally, but also of the Spanish Government, for your courtesy in consenting to render us this important service at an exceedingly critical moment, I fear that, in my anxiety, I may have brought rather an unfair amount of pressure to bear upon you in order to overcome your scruples; but I trust that you will ultimately forgive me for that. And I am quite sure that if, as I have understood, you intend to prolong your stay in Cuba, the time will come when you will be glad to have placed us all under an obligation. I offer you a thousand thanks, Señor, and have the honour to bid you good-day!"

And thereupon, with many bows, his Excellency the Capitan-General of Cuba followed the skipper of the cruiser to the gangway and thence down into their boat.

"Well," exclaimed Milsom, who had contrived to follow the conversation sufficiently to get a fairly accurate impression of what had transpired, "you have managed to get us all fairly into the centre of a hobble by consenting to run those men down to Mulata Bay! How the mischief do you propose to get out of it again without putting all the fat in the fire?"

"Quite easily, my dear Phil, or you may bet your bottom dollar that I would never have consented," answered Jack. "You see, the Spanish ships have had their engines tampered with. Very well: ours have been tampered with too—Macintyre will have to see to that. While the old chap was talking, the idea occurred to me that if I should persist in my refusal, Captain Morillo might, in desperation, take it into his head to send away a boat expedition to Mulata Bay; and, the people there being of opinion that everything is all right, they may take matters prettily easily, with the result that the boat expedition might possibly have arrived in time to effect a seizure. Therefore while, for the sake of effect, I pretended to be very unwilling to fall in with his Excellency's views, I had decided that I would do so, almost as soon as I saw what was coming. Now, my plan is this. We will take the Spanish crowd aboard and run them down toward Mulata Bay, which will put an effectual stopper upon any attempt to dispatch another expedition. But, when we get down abreast of our destination, our engines will break down, and instead of going into Mulata Bay, we shall go driving helplessly away down to leeward before this fine, roaring trade wind; and before we can get the ship again under command *the James B. Potter* will have discharged her cargo and got away again. And I reckon upon our appearance off the place under the Spanish ensign and pennant to give all concerned a hint as to the importance of 'hustling' over their job. Twiggez?"

"Je twig—I tumble!" answered Milsom. "And a very pretty scheme it is, too, Jack—does you proud, old man; it ought to work like a charm. Now, before the Spanish Johnnies come aboard, I'll just hunt up Macintyre, and post him upon his share of the work, while you go and explain matters to the Don and his family. Who-oo! It will be interesting to observe the expression on the countenances of our Spanish friends when our engines—tampered with by those pestilent revolutionaries—break down!"

Chapter Eleven.

An expedition that failed.

A few minutes sufficed Jack to explain the situation to the Montijo family, to their mingled indignation and amusement; and he then suggested that, as the yacht would possibly be rolling and tumbling about somewhat unpleasantly in the heavy sea outside while in her apparently helpless condition, the ladies might prefer to pass the night ashore, in one of the Havana hotels. But neither of them would for a moment listen to any such proposal: the Señora explained that she had never yet been seasick, and did not propose to begin now; while Doña Isolda opined that it would be no worse for her than if they had gone to sea in the ordinary way during the afternoon, so she, too, elected to remain on board and take her chance. Then, while they were all talking together, Milsom came up on to the top of the deck-house with the information that Macintyre fully understood what was wanted and was making elaborate preparations for a perfectly gorgeous breakdown of the engines—the maximum speed of which during the trip would not exceed fourteen knots, at the outside. And presently the cruiser's first cutter pushed off from her parent ship's side and came pulling toward the yacht, with twenty seamen and five marines on board, in addition to her own crew, all armed to the teeth, and Captain Morillo and another officer in the stern-sheets.

A few minutes later the boat swept up alongside, and the two officers ascended to the deck, where they were met by Jack and Milsom.

"Señor Singleton, and Señor Capitan Milsom, permit me to have the honour of presenting to you Señor el Teniente Villacampa, the officer who will have the command of the expedition," said Morillo. "He will be responsible for the good behaviour of the men, and will lead them to the attack of the ship and those on shore who will be assisting in the landing of the cargo; but, apart from that duty, he will of course be under your orders. I have brought you," he continued, taking a bundle of bunting from Villacampa, "an ensign and a pennant, which you will substitute for your own colours at the moment which you may deem most suitable. And now, what about boats? Will you tow the one which is alongside; or would you rather use your own?"

"I think your people had better use the yacht's boats, Señor," answered Jack. "We have plenty; and it will look more in keeping."

"Very well, Señor; I agree with you there," acquiesced Morillo. "And now, as you are doubtless anxious to make an immediate start, I will bid you good-bye; and trust that the expedition will be completely successful. You have full

instructions how to proceed, Señor," he added to his lieutenant; and then, cap in hand, bowed himself through the gangway and down the side.

As the cruiser's boat shoved off, Milsom ascended to the bridge and, laying his hand on the engine-room telegraph, rang "Stand by!"

"Are you all ready to slip, there, Mr Perkins?" he demanded.

"All ready, sir," answered Perkins.

"Then let go!" ordered Milsom, moving the handle to "Half speed ahead!"

"Lay aft, some hands, and stow the gangway ladder. Quartermaster, stand by to dip our ensign to the cruiser as we pass her; and when she has acknowledged it, haul it and the burgee down and stow them away in the flag locker!"

"Are you acquainted with Señor Montijo and his family?" asked Jack politely, addressing himself to Lieutenant Villacampa, who looked as though he felt slightly uncomfortable and out of his element.

"I have not that honour, Señor," answered Villacampa, looking still more uncomfortable.

"Then come up on the deck-house, and let me introduce you," said Jack. "They are most delightful people, and I am sure they will be pleased to know you. Your men had better consider the after deck as their end of the ship, and make themselves as comfortable as they can there. She is a fairly dry little ship, and I think they will be all right there."

Whereupon Villacampa gave a brief order to his men, and then followed Jack up the ladder to the top of the deck-house, where he was duly made known to its occupants—to the great gratification of Morillo, who witnessed the little ceremony as the yacht swept past his boat. The lieutenant was very cordially received, as had already been agreed upon by those principally concerned; and, being a very pleasant-mannered and agreeable young fellow, soon found that he was enjoying himself amazingly.

"You have a fine, speedy little ship under you, Señor," he said, anxious to make himself agreeable, as the yacht, having passed the cruiser and opened out the harbour's mouth, quickened up her pace to fourteen knots.

"Y-es," admitted Jack, in that grudging, depreciatory tone of voice which, for some inexplicable reason, so many Englishmen use when speaking of their own property; "she is not bad, for her size. But a knot or two more would be welcome, just now; for we are late in starting, and we shall have our work cut out to make Mulata Bay before dark. I have been taking a look at my chart, and I see that the place lies inside a reef. Are you acquainted with the pilotage of that part of the coast, Señor?"

"Oh yes, Señor!" answered the lieutenant; "I have been in and out of Mulata Bay several times. That was chiefly why Captain Morillo selected me to command the expedition. The navigation, however, is not difficult; and, once through the Cayo Blanco passage, we shall be all right."

"No doubt," agreed Jack. "But it is just the getting through that passage that I have been feeling unhappy about. We draw eight feet of water aft, and my chart says that there are only nine feet in the passage."

Villacampa admitted that the depth of water shown on the chart was about right, and confessed that the situation, now that one came to look at it, was somewhat awkward; still, he was of opinion that if they could but arrive off the mouth of the pass before dark everything would be all right.

At five o'clock the stewards brought up the tables and proceeded to serve tea; and Villacampa, who somehow found himself seated between Señorita Isolda and Capitan Milsom, told himself that he had missed his vocation, and that he ought to have been skipper of an English steam-yacht—with a lovely and fascinating Spanish Señorita as a passenger—instead of second lieutenant of a dirty Spanish cruiser.

They were running along the coast and steering a course of west by south half-south, which gave them a gradually increasing offing, and was a nice, safe course to steer, for it would take them well clear of all dangers; the result being that when at length they arrived off the Cayo Blanco passage, the yacht was quite ten miles off the land, and about five miles distant from the edge of the reef. If Villacampa had noticed how wide an offing was being maintained, he would probably have suggested the desirability of hauling in a point or two; but he did not, for he was being made much of by the ladies, while Jack had artfully placed him with his back toward the land. Milsom, meanwhile, had been watching the coast as a cat watches a mousehole, and the moment that he saw certain marks come "on" he raised his cap and proceeded to mop his perspiring forehead with a large bandana handkerchief; whereupon Perkins, who had been for some time keeping an unostentatious eye upon the party on the top of the deck-house, turned and sauntered aft to the engine-room door, sneezing violently as he walked past it. The next instant there arose a perfectly hair-raising clatter and clash of metal down in the engine-room, and the engines abruptly ceased to revolve! So sudden and startling was the clatter that both ladies screamed, and clasped their hands convulsively, in the most natural manner possible; while Jack and Milsom, starting to their feet and capsizing their chairs with magnificent dramatic effect, dashed, one upon the heels of the other, down the ladder toward the engine-room, the steam from the blow-off at the same moment roaring through the safety valves with violence enough to scare a nervous person out of his wits. The quartermaster, keeping a level head in the midst of the hubbub, promptly ported his helm and turned the yacht's head toward the open sea, and the little craft at once, as though entering thoroughly into the spirit of the thing, began to roll her rails under as the sea caught her square abeam. The Spanish seamen and marines, startled into sudden activity by the commotion, sprang to their feet, and, after glancing about them for an instant with scared faces, made a dash with one accord for the boats, and were only with difficulty restrained from lowering them, and driven away from the davits by a strong party of the yacht's crew,

under Perkins, aided by Jack and Villacampa. Taking the affair "by and large", Macintyre had certainly very effectively fulfilled his promise to produce "a perfectly gorgeous breakdown!"

Lieutenant Villacampa was, of course, naturally very anxious to learn the extent of the damage, and how far it was likely to interfere with his execution of the duty confided to him by his superiors; and the poor fellow wrung his hands in despair when Macintyre presently came on deck with a big bolt smashed in two in his hand and, with a great show of indignation, informed the Spaniard in broad Scotch—of which, of course, the poor fellow did not understand a word—that some unknown scoundrel had surreptitiously withdrawn nine such bolts from a certain coupling, and that the other three had, as a natural consequence, gradually sheered through under the excessive strain thrown upon them; and that for his part he was only surprised that the machinery had brought them as far as it had without giving out: and that, furthermore, since it would be necessary to make twelve new bolts to replace those missing and destroyed, it would be several hours, at the earliest, before the yacht could again be brought under control. All of which Jack, struggling valiantly against a violent disposition to laugh uproariously, translated to the unhappy Spanish lieutenant. Then, to add still further to that officer's chagrin and disappointment, the yacht, with the Spanish ensign and pennant snapping from gaff-end and masthead in the roaring trade wind, drove slowly but steadily past the mouth of Mulata Bay, and the young man had the mortification of catching, through a powerful pair of binoculars lent him by Jack, a brief glimpse of the *James B. Potter* at anchor in the bay, surrounded by a whole flotilla of boats, with steam winches hard at work, and great cases swinging over the side from all three hatchways at the same moment. It was a scurvy trick of fate, he explained to Jack, that he should have been so very near to making a capture important enough to have insured his promotion, and to have had success snatched from him at the moment when it was all but within his grasp. Jack emphatically agreed with him that it was, but rather spoiled the effect immediately afterward by asking: "What about the damage to his engines?" It was, however, obviously a case in which nothing could be done but wait patiently until the necessary repairs could be effected; and, after all, there was, as Jack pointed out, just one solitary grain of comfort in the situation, in that the breakdown had occurred while the yacht was still far enough from the shore to be safe from the peril of stranding. Had the accident been deferred until the vessel was on the point of entering the passage through the reef, the yacht would undoubtedly have been flung by the sea upon the sharp coral and dashed to pieces; when the furious surf, which was at that moment foaming and swirling over the reef, and to which Jack directed Villacampa's attention, must have inevitably drowned every soul on board. This was a fact so patent to the meanest comprehension that the Spanish lieutenant speedily forgot his disappointment, and hastened up on to the deck-house to explain to the ladies how narrow had been their escape from a terrible shipwreck, and to congratulate them upon the circumstance that they were still alive.

Meanwhile, the deck hands, under Milsom's supervision, had been busily engaged in getting up on deck and rigging a sea anchor, which was dropped overboard when the yacht had drifted some three miles to the westward of the Cayo Blanco passage; and as there was a strong current setting eastward at the time, the effect was not only to bring the yacht head to wind and sea, and cause her to ride very much more easily and comfortably, but also to effectually check her further drift to the westward. Then came dinner in the saloon, and as Villacampa took his seat at the elegantly appointed table, and noted with keen appreciation the prompt and orderly service of the luxurious meal, he felt fully confirmed in his previous conviction that he had missed his proper vocation.

The rising moon had just cleared the horizon and was flooding the weltering waters with her silvery light when, the saloon party being once more assembled on the top of the deck-house for the better enjoyment of the grateful coolness of the night air, a large steamer, which could be none other than the *James B. Potter*, was seen to come out of Mulata Bay and head for the passage, steaming thence out to sea and away to the eastward at a rapid pace, though not so fast but that Villacampa, unconsciously biting his finger nails to the quick in the excess of his mortification, felt convinced that the yacht could have caught her, had that vessel only been under way at the moment. She was not, however, and it was not until the American craft had sunk beyond the eastern horizon a good hour and a half that Macintyre came up on deck to report that he had completed his repairs and was ready to once more start his engines. Whereupon the sea anchor was got inboard and, since there was nothing else to be done, the yacht returned to Havana harbour at a speed of fourteen knots—her engines working as smoothly as though they had never broken down—arriving at her former berth and picking up her buoy at about two o'clock a.m. Captain Morillo, who had been anxiously awaiting her return, promptly made his appearance alongside in the cruiser's cutter, for the purpose of taking off his men and learning the result of the expedition; and great was his wrath and disgust on hearing that it had failed, after all, in consequence of a breakdown of the yacht's engines. He was most searching and minute in his enquiries as to the nature and cause of the accident, which, he eventually agreed with Jack, had undoubtedly been brought about by the miscreants who were responsible for the disablement of the Spanish warships, and who, it was perfectly evident, had determined to ensure the success of the American undertaking by tampering with the machinery of every vessel in the harbour which could by any possibility be employed to frustrate it. Ere taking his leave he ventured to express the hope that Jack and Captain Milsom would do him the favour to accompany him when he went ashore, a few hours later, to report to the Capitan-General the failure of the expedition, as it would be his duty to do: but Jack courteously yet very firmly declined to do anything of the kind, pointing out that Lieutenant Villacampa, who had commanded the expedition, was perfectly able to furnish every particular that the General might require; while, further, Jack considered that very unfair pressure had been brought to bear upon him to induce him to lend his yacht for the purpose of the expedition, and he therefore felt perfectly justified in declining to afford any further assistance to the local representative of the Spanish Government. Whereupon Captain Morillo expressed his profound regret that Señor Singleton should have cause to feel himself aggrieved, and departed, taking his men and his flags with him. The *Thetis* steamed out of Havana harbour again at eight o'clock that same morning.

It is unnecessary to follow in detail the course of the voyagers during the pleasure cruise upon which they had embarked; for while they thoroughly enjoyed themselves the cruise was absolutely uneventful. Suffice it to say that, proceeding in a very leisurely fashion, they completely circumnavigated the island of Cuba, calling in at Matanzas, Cardenas, Nuevitas, Guantanamo, Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Xagua, Batabano, and other more or less interesting ports on the coast; sometimes remaining only a few hours, at other times spending as many days in harbour, while Don Hermoso made certain mysterious excursions inland and had secret conferences with more or less mysterious

people, during the progress of which Jack, Carlos, and the two ladies enjoyed themselves amazingly in the steam pinnacle, in which craft they made excursions up rivers, and prowled about among romantic cays to their hearts' content. Then they crossed to Jamaica, where they enjoyed ample opportunity to compare the condition of that island, under British rule, with Cuba under the government of the Spaniards, as also to learn how the Jamaicans construe the word "hospitality". Dances, picnics, dinners at Government House and elsewhere, balls at Up-Park camp and on board the battleships at Port Royal succeeded each other with bewildering rapidity; while they were positively deluged with invitations to spend a week or more on various sugar estates dotted about here and there in some of the most beautiful parts of the lovely island: small wonder was it, therefore, that six full weeks slid away ere the *Thetis* again steamed out to sea from Port Royal. Thence, coasting along the southern shores of San Domingo, the travellers visited Porto Rico, where Don Hermoso again had much business to transact with mysterious strangers, occupying a full fortnight; after which Saint Kitts, Antigua, Montserrat, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, Saint Lucia, Barbados, Saint Vincent, Grenada, and finally Trinidad (to see the wonderful Pitch Lake) were visited: by which time the month of February in the year 1895 had arrived, and Don Hermoso became anxious to be at home again, as certain very important and momentous events were pending, the progress of which he was anxious to watch as closely as might be. Wherefore, on a certain evening, the yacht weighed her anchor shortly before two bells in the first dogwatch, and, steaming close past the Five Islands, the Diego Islands, Gaspar Grande, and Mono Island, swept out through the Boca de Navios, and shaped a course north-west by west for Cape Tiburon, in the island of Hayti, which was passed at daybreak on the morning but one following; the yacht finally entering Havana harbour and making fast to a buoy at eight o'clock on the morning of the succeeding day. The Montijo family landed immediately after breakfast, and took the first available train to Pinar del Rio, hoping to arrive home the same evening: but Jack remained on board the yacht, as she was by this time so exceedingly foul that it had been decided to dock her and have her cleaned in readiness for any emergency; and, Singleton being her ostensible owner, it was deemed a wise and prudent thing that he should remain at Havana to personally arrange for the work to be done, lest suspicion as to the genuineness of his ownership should arise in the minds of any of the Spanish officials.

As Jack went hither and thither about his business, after having seen his friends off by train, he was astonished at the change that had taken place in the appearance of Havana since he had last seen it on that memorable day when the Capitan-General had visited the *Thetis* and persuaded—or, rather, practically compelled—him to lend that vessel for the purpose of attempting the capture of the *James B. Potter*. Then, Havana was simply a busy seaport; now, it was a fortress preparing for war. The streets were full of troops, fresh landed from the transports in the harbour and marching to the railway stations to entrain for various parts of the island; guns, ammunition and ambulance wagons were rumbling and rattling over the cobbles; excited aides-de-camp were furiously spurring hither and thither, the air was clamorous with the strains of martial music and the incessant shouting of military words of command; the Alameda was an armed camp; and the cafés and restaurants were crowded with arrogant, boasting, posturing military and naval officers, with a small sprinkling of civilians who were made to clearly understand that they were there only on sufferance. Jack could not help noticing the scowls with which the soldiery regarded him, and many an insulting epithet and remark reached his ears; but he was not such a fool as to permit himself to be provoked into a quarrel, single-handed, with thousands, and he therefore went calmly and steadily on his way, taking no more notice of the offensive words than if they had not been spoken, and following the narrow side streets as much as possible. In course of time he arrived at the office of the British Consul, and turned in to pay a call upon that gentleman. He found the official in question up to his eyes in business, but nevertheless received a very cordial greeting, if not a particularly hearty welcome.

"Hillo, Singleton, what are you doing back here, and at this moment, above all others?" exclaimed the Consul, rising and holding out his hand. "I was in hopes that you were safely back in the old country long ago."

"Indeed?" said Jack, taking the other's proffered hand. "Why safely back? Is Cuba, then, an especially dangerous place for an Englishman just now?"

"Well, I will not go so far as to give an unqualified answer in the affirmative to that question," replied the Consul; "but this I will say, that I would certainly not recommend any Englishman to remain on the island at this juncture, unless he is fully prepared to prove to the authorities that he has good and sufficient reasons for so doing. The fact is that Cuba is the crater of a political volcano at the present moment, and nobody quite knows what is going to happen. For some years now, in fact ever since '68, the Cubans have been in a state of more or less unrest, and in more or less open revolt against the Spanish rule; and the indications have for some time past been that the events of '68 to '78 are about to be repeated, possibly in a more aggravated form. It is well-known that large consignments of arms, ammunition, and military stores have recently been smuggled into the country, yet, strangely enough, so great has been the vacillation of the Government mind that, although they have done their utmost to put a stop to the smuggling, they have finished there; no effort has been made to discover what has become of the smuggled cargoes, and, beyond vaguely and generally suspecting all who have not openly declared themselves in favour of the continuance of Spanish rule, no serious endeavour has been made to discover the identity of the conspirators. The fact is, that the Spanish Government is acting precisely like the fabled ostrich; it is burying its head in the sand and refusing to see the coming trouble. Even now, although two armed risings have very recently taken place, one in the province of Santiago and the other in that of Mantanzas—the latter, by the way, having been promptly suppressed—the official mind persists in asserting that the movement is nothing more than an attempt on the part of a few bandits to commit robbery and outrage of every description under the mask of patriotism! Yet you may have observed, as you passed through the streets to-day, that, despite all their assertions, they are behaving very much as though they were in a state of mortal terror. And another symptom of scare is the marked suspicion and distrust, not to say aversion, with which they regard strangers, especially Americans and Englishmen, in the island. The Americans, as you may possibly be aware, have not taken very much trouble to conceal the fact that their sympathies are distinctly on the side of the Cubans, and Spanish intelligence seems unable to differentiate between an American and an Englishman. That is why I say that I would not recommend an Englishman to remain in Cuba just now unless he possesses the means of satisfying the Spaniards that he is not inimical to them."

"Well," said Jack, "if there is an Englishman in the whole island who can do that, I think I ought to be that man; for did

I not place my yacht at their service for the purpose of smashing up one of those gun-running expeditions that you were speaking of just now, at the moment when every one of their warships in the harbour had been disabled?"

"Ah, yes!" said the Consul, "I remember hearing something of that affair, although the authorities did their best to hush it up. You failed, I believe, in consequence of your engines breaking down?"

"Yes," said Jack, "just off Mulata Bay, the precise spot where the American steamer was landing her cargo. As a matter of fact, we actually saw her at it."

"A most extraordinary affair!" remarked the Consul. "When the vessels were subsequently docked, it was discovered that their propellers had been rendered immovable by being locked with stout chains, from which it was surmised that the outrage must have been perpetrated by means of some kind of diving vessel; but where such a craft could have come from heaven only knows, for nothing of the kind has been discovered or got wind of in any of the harbours of Cuba—although I suppose it would not be a very difficult matter for people acquainted with the working of such a vessel to conceal her very effectually at the bottom of some out-of-the-way bay. I remember reading, some years ago, the story of a gigantic craft that was either airship or submarine, at the will of her crew, and which was capable of doing some very wonderful things; but I regarded the yarn as nothing more than the flight of a romancer's vivid imagination. Yet it must have been some such vessel that disabled the Spanish warships; which goes to prove again the soundness of the old adage that 'truth is stranger than fiction'. But your yacht's disablement was an entirely different matter, as I understood, for you actually steamed several miles before you broke down. Did you ever discover to whom you were indebted for your mishap?"

"How could we?" answered Jack. "We went to sea again the next morning, and have been absent ever since. I was thinking that I would call upon the Capitan-General, and ask him if any of his people had ever been able to find a clue to the identity of the guilty parties."

"Were you?" said the Consul. "Then let me very strongly advise you not to do anything of the kind. He has plenty to worry him just now without being reminded of an exceedingly unpleasant and annoying incident. And, finally, be persuaded by me to clear out of Cuba at the very earliest possible moment; for the island is certainly at present no place for a young fellow like you, who have a good business at home, and no business at all here. Even if you are serious in your idea of purchasing land and establishing a tobacco-growing estate, this is certainly not the time at which to engage in such an undertaking: for, in the first place, the very strong suspicion and distrust with which the authorities at the present moment regard all foreigners would render it almost impossible for you to secure an inalienable title to your land; and, in the next place, when all other difficulties were surmounted, you would find that no labourers were to be had—every mother's son of them being an insurgent, either openly or secretly—and consequently you could get no work done on your land. Therefore it will manifestly be prudent for you to postpone your undertaking until the present imbroglio is at an end and the island is at peace once more. And now, I am afraid that I must bid you good-morning; for this insurrection has piled up a lot of extra business for me as well as for others. But I have given you the very best advice of which I am capable, and I hope that you will not only think it over but very speedily act upon it; for I tell you candidly that Cuba is an exceedingly unsafe place for any Englishman just now."

"Upon my word," said Jack, "I am very much disposed to believe that you are right; and I will certainly think over what you have said. Good-bye, and many thanks for your most excellent advice!"

But even as the young man left the office and issued upon the crowded street, he knew that he had not the remotest intention of acting upon the Consul's advice, to the extent of leaving Cuba at all events: for he felt that he was morally pledged to stand by the Montijos, so long as they might need him; and there was the complication of the ownership of the yacht, which would need a great deal of straightening out; and, lastly, his close association with the lovely Señorita Isolda, during the four months' cruise just ended, had not been without its effect upon him; so that, taking things all round, he told himself that for him to leave Cuba at present was quite out of the question.

When Jack set about making the necessary arrangements for the docking of the *Thetis* he at once found himself confronted with that adamantine procrastination which constitutes such a serious flaw in the Spanish character; *mañana* (to-morrow) is the word that is most often in the Spaniard's mouth, and his invincible determination never to do to-day what can possibly be postponed until the morrow is perhaps as marked a national characteristic as is the indomitable pride of every Spaniard, from the highest grandee down to the meanest beggar to be found outside a church door. Thus, although the dock happened at that moment to be empty, Singleton found it absolutely impossible to infuse into the dock-officials the energy necessary to enable them to make arrangements for the entrance of the yacht on that day. *Mañana* was the word, wherever he turned; and *mañana* it had to be. And even when at length, late on the following day, the vessel was safely docked and the steam pumps started by which the water was to be pumped out of the enclosure and the vessel left dry and accessible to the workmen, it proved so exceedingly difficult to prevail upon these workmen to get to work that at length Jack and Milsom, driven to despair, and with their patience absolutely exhausted, were obliged to set their own people on to the job of removing from the ship's bottom the thick growth of barnacles and sea grass with which it was encrusted, and afterwards to cover the steel plating with a fresh coating of anti-fouling composition. It was thus a full week from the date of the yacht's arrival in Havana harbour ere she was once more afloat and ready for sea, and Jack at length felt himself free to fulfil his promise to rejoin the Montijo family at their hacienda.

Chapter Twelve.

Bad news.

It was a glorious morning when Jack, after an early breakfast, made his way to the railway station and, having written

two days before to apprise his friends of his coming, demanded a first-class ticket for Pinar del Rio. He was gratified to find that not only were there no troops going by his train, but also that very few people were travelling by it, and that he was therefore likely to be able to secure a compartment to himself; for he found himself in a most unaccountable state of excitement at the prospect of meeting his friends once more, and was also acutely conscious of a desire to be absolutely alone in order that he might be free to picture to himself the precise manner in which "she" would be likely to receive him. There was also another reason why the young man was anxious to be alone during his journey, which was that, mingling curiously with the feeling of exhilaration resulting from pleasurable anticipation, there was a certain vague uneasiness, traceable to the fact that no word, either by telegram or letter, had come to him from any member of the Montijo family since he had said *au revoir* to them on that platform nine days ago. He had not had much time to dwell upon this fact while the yacht was in dock; indeed, he had been so exceedingly busy, and so dog-tired at the end of each day's work, that it had scarcely obtruded itself upon his attention: but now he began to worry himself as to why it was that someone—by which he really meant Doña Isolda—had not been able to find time to drop him so much as two or three lines to say that they had arrived safely, and were hoping to see him soon. Of course, as he told himself, there was no very particular reason why anyone should have written so very vapid and commonplace a piece of intelligence as that they had arrived home safely, for it might be taken for granted that they had done so: the trains in Cuba travelled too slowly, and the traffic was too meagre, to admit of the possibility of an accident—and, moreover, there had been no news of any such thing; and, apart from an accident, there was absolutely no reason that Jack could think of why his friends should not reach their destination in safety. Yet this young man, usually so reasonable and level-headed, was now fast worrying himself into a fever because certain people had not done something which he constantly assured himself there was not the slightest need for them to have done. And when at length the train drew up at the platform of Pinar del Rio station, and he saw Señor Eugenio Calderon, Don Hermoso's manager, waiting thereon, his heart sank, a momentary feeling of sickness and giddiness seized him, and as he reeled out of the carriage on to the platform he muttered to himself: "I knew it; I was certain that something was wrong!" Then he pulled himself together and turned to greet Señor Calderon as unconcernedly as might be.

"Well, Señor Calderon, how are you, and how are all at the hacienda?" he exclaimed. "Don Hermoso received my note, I suppose, and—?"

"Let us walk to the end of the platform, Señor," replied Calderon, drawing him away out of earshot of the little crowd of alighting and embarking passengers. "I received your letter, Señor Singleton, and, in the absence of Don Hermoso, opened it, as I have opened all letters arriving for him since he left the hacienda. And when I had read it I came to the conclusion that it was my duty to meet you here upon your arrival; for, Señor, I can no longer hide from myself the fear that something untoward has befallen Don Hermoso and his family. I duly received the telegram which he dispatched to me from Havana, apprising me of his arrival there and his intention to return home that same day, and, as requested by the message, I dispatched the carriage here to meet the train by which he said he intended to travel; but on the following day the carriage returned to the house with the intelligence that neither Don Hermoso nor any of the family had arrived, either by the train indicated in the telegram, or by any subsequent train. From this I very naturally concluded that something had occurred to detain the party in Havana, and I looked, from day to day, for a letter or message of some kind explaining the delay; but nothing came, and when at length I received your letter, and gathered from it that you believed the family to be at home, I at once felt that something very wrong had happened, and came to the conclusion that the proper thing for me to do was to meet you here and inform you of all the circumstances."

"Of course," concurred Jack; "that certainly was the proper thing to do. But what can possibly have happened to them all? And why the dickens did you not write to me at once when the party failed to turn up?"

"I can see now that I ought to have done so," said Calderon. "But you see, Señor," he added in excuse; "I was constantly expecting to hear from Don Hermoso, explaining his absence and naming another day for his arrival; and in this condition of expectancy the days slipped away."

"Yes," assented Jack grimly; "I see. Well, it is useless to worry about that now; the question is: What has become of them all? People do not disappear in that mysterious fashion without a cause. It is certain that they did not remain in Havana, for I saw them off; and if they had gone back to the city they would have returned to the yacht, or communicated with me in some way. And it is equally certain that when they stepped aboard the train that morning, they fully intended to return to the house. Their disappearance, therefore, is involuntary on their part; I am confident of that. Now, what can be the explanation of this most singular occurrence? Can it be that—by the way, Señor Calderon, have you had any visitors to the house during the absence of Don Hermoso and his family?"

"Yes, Señor, unfortunately we have had visitors—on one occasion; and that visit may very possibly—now that you come to mention it—have had something to do with the disappearance of Señor Montijo and his family. It occurred some three weeks ago; and the visitors consisted of an officer of cavalry and a dozen troopers. He—the officer—enquired for Don Hermoso; and, when told that he was absent from home, demanded the keys of Don Hermoso's desk, which he compelled me to surrender. And when I had handed over the keys, the officer sat down at the desk and spent nearly three hours in going through the whole of Señor Montijo's private papers, some of which he took away with him."

"Did he make any remark, or say who he was?" demanded Jack.

"No, Señor; neither the one nor the other," answered Calderon.

"How long have you been in Don Hermoso's service?" demanded Jack.

"For eleven years and—let me consider—yes—for eleven years and nine months, Señor. And I owe to Don Hermoso everything that I have," answered Calderon.

"And I suppose you are fully in Don Hermoso's confidence?" asked Jack.

"I believe so, Señor," answered Calderon; "I doubt very much whether he has any secrets from me. I know, for instance," dropping his voice almost to a whisper, "that the yacht *Thetis*, which is understood to be your property, really belongs to him. I also know that she brought out from England a large consignment of arms, ammunition, and stores for the use of the insurgents, and that the consignment was landed in the Laguna de Cortes; and I am fully aware that Señor Montijo is actively sympathetic with the insurgents—as is every member of his family and household, down to the meanest stable boy or labourer in the fields."

"In that case," said Jack, "the probability is that the papers which the unknown cavalry officer took away with him were of a more or less compromising character, eh?"

"I very much fear so, Señor," answered Calderon. "Or, if not exactly compromising, at least of such a character as to prove that Don Hermoso was both sympathetic and in correspondence with the insurgent faction. Pardon me for saying so, Señor Singleton, but I quite easily perceive, by your manner, that you are not at all certain of my fidelity to Don Hermoso. I hope to convince you of that in due time, however; and meanwhile I honour you for your distrust, for it proves your friendly interest in my employer and his family. I shall remain here to manage the estate and guard my employer's interests as long as I am permitted to do so; and, if I mistake not, you will presently be leaving here to return to Havana, with the object of discovering what has happened to Don Hermoso and his family. My own opinion now is that they have all been arrested as conspirators, upon evidence supplied by those abstracted papers—and, if so, I say most fervently, God help them! for the Spaniards will show them no mercy. And, as to my fidelity, Señor, perhaps I can even now afford you some small proof of it by guiding your first footsteps in your search for the lost ones. When you return to Havana, call upon Don Ramon Bergera, whose house is in the Calle del Ignacio, immediately opposite the mansion of the Capitan-General. He is a great friend of Don Hermoso, and—although I believe quite unsuspected by the authorities—an ardent sympathiser with the insurgents; he is also preternaturally clever in obtaining information of all kinds, and solving mysteries. Introduce yourself to him; tell him all that you know of the matter, and all that I have told you; and be guided by him. And with his skill and your courage, Señor Singleton, I trust that all may even yet be well with my honoured friend and patron and his family. Now, here comes your train, Señor; so I will bid you good-bye, and wish you the best of good luck. Should it be necessary for you to communicate with me at any time, it will be advisable to do so by special messenger; for there is only too much reason to suspect that letters are often scrutinised during their passage through the post office. Now you will have to be quick if you wish to get your ticket; so *adios, Señor! Hasta mas verle.*"

The sun's last rays were gilding the walls of the Morro and the Cabaña castles when Jack stepped out of the train at Havana Central Station that evening; but the residence of Don Ramon Bergera was close at hand, and the young Englishman determined to call, there and then, in the hope of finding the Don at home. He was fortunately successful; and five minutes later he found himself in the presence of a fine, distinguished-looking man, with piercing black eyes that seemed to look one through and through. Jack was favourably impressed at once, for there was a look of strength, moral as well as physical, and of straightforwardness, about the man who faced him, that very powerfully appealed to the simple honesty of the Englishman, as also did the frank, open-hearted courtesy of his reception.

"Pray be seated, Señor Singleton," said Don Ramon, placing a chair for his visitor; "I am very glad to make your acquaintance. Allow me to offer you a cigar and a glass of sangaree; the latter will refresh you, for you look hot, tired, and dusty, as though you had just made a journey."

"I have," said Jack, gratefully accepting the proffered refreshment; and availing himself forthwith of the opening afforded by Don Ramon's remark, he proceeded to tell the whole story of the mysterious disappearance of the Montijo family, winding it up by mentioning that he had made this call at Calderon's suggestion.

"I am very glad indeed that you acted upon that suggestion," said Don Ramon. "Calderon is all right; he is absolutely faithful and trustworthy, and Don Hermoso's interests are perfectly safe in his hands. And now, let us consider the very serious question of this mysterious evanishment of my friend and his family. Did I understand you to say that you actually saw them leave Havana?"

"Yes," said Jack, "I went with them to the station, and chatted with them until the train pulled out."

"Then," said Don Ramon, "it is obvious that the disappearance occurred somewhere between Havana and Pinar del Rio—possibly at Santiago, or maybe at Bejucal. If I cannot hear anything of them elsewhere I will run down to both those places to-morrow and institute a few judicious enquiries. Meanwhile, I fear that Señor Calderon's apprehensions as to the arrest of the entire family are only too well-founded. The fact that a party of soldiers was sent to search Don Hermoso's house proves most conclusively that my friend had somehow contrived to arouse the suspicion of the authorities, which, after all, is not very surprising, knowing what I do as to Don Hermoso's connection with the insurgents; and the fact that certain papers were seized by the search party points to the inference that those papers contained incriminating evidence. And if they did I can only say that I am heartily sorry for the family, for since the recent risings the Government is adopting the most ruthless measures to discourage even passive sympathy with the insurgents; and we know—you and I—that Don Hermoso's sympathy was something very much more than passive. Now, there is another question which I should like to ask you. Do you happen to know whether by any chance Don Hermoso has been unfortunate enough to make any enemies among the Government entourage?—for I may tell you that the present moment is a particularly favourable one for the gratification of private enmity, if the enemy happens to be connected with the Government."

Jack considered for a moment. "No," he said slowly, "I am not aware of anything of—stop a moment, though! Yes, by Jove, there is something of that kind, after all! There is a certain Captain Alvaros, belonging to one of your infantry regiments, who had the confounded impudence to propose his marriage with Señorita Isolda, although the young lady is only about sixteen years of age, I believe; and Don Hermoso, very rightly, would not hear of it, refused the

fellow point-blank, I understood, and forbade him the house."

"Phew!" whistled Don Ramon, with some show of consternation; "is that so? Caramba! I am sorry to hear that. What you have just said is amply sufficient to account for everything. I know a good deal about Don Sebastian Alvaros, enough to assure you, Señor Singleton, that he is, as you English say, 'a thorough bad egg'; and, worse than that, he is also a man of some standing and importance in official circles. Now that you come to mention it, I remember that he was stationed, with his company, at Pinar del Rio not so very long ago; but within the last two months he has been made governor of the prison of La Jacoba. Poor Don Hermoso; I am sorry for him! Of course, knowing Alvaros, as he must have done, to refuse him was the only thing possible; but it is a bitter misfortune for him and all his family that the fellow should ever have had an opportunity to see Doña Isolda. And, of course, he was also after Don Hermoso's money, knowing, as he doubtless did, that the son-in-law of Señor Montijo will be an exceedingly lucky man in every respect. Now, Señor Singleton, have you anything else to tell me? Because, if not, I will dispense with ceremony and bid you good evening. Under other circumstances it would have afforded me the greatest possible pleasure if you would have stayed to dine with me: but after what you have told me I shall dine at a restaurant not very far from here, which is largely patronised by officers and Government officials; possibly I may meet someone there from whom I may be fortunate enough to extract a little information. And I will not ask you to accompany me, because it is very desirable that you and I should not be seen together, and that it should not be known that we are acquainted. For which reason it will also be advisable that, in the event of our meeting each other in the street, we should behave as strangers, taking no notice of each other. But you will naturally be anxious to know how I am progressing with my enquiries; and it is also desirable that we should meet and confer together from time to time: therefore our meeting-place had better be here. But do not enter by the front door, as you did this evening, lest someone, knowing you by sight, and aware of your friendship for Don Hermoso—who, you must remember, is a suspected man—should see you, and the fact of our acquaintance thus become known. When you have occasion to call upon me—which I trust, Señor, will be very often—come to the little wicket in the back wall of my garden, by which I am about to let you out, and I will give my gardener instructions to admit you whenever you may present yourself; there will thus be much less chance of our acquaintance with each other becoming known."

So saying, Don Ramon conducted his visitor down a narrow corkscrew staircase into a large and most beautiful garden, where Jack and the gardener were duly confronted with each other, and certain instructions given to the latter; after which the gate in the wall was opened, and, with a prior precautionary peep, to ensure that no lurking watcher was in sight, the young Englishman was gently hustled into a narrow and very dark and dirty lane.

"Your way lies to the left," murmured Don Ramon, as he shook hands with Jack and bade him good night. "Walk in the middle of the road; and keep a wary eye on the courts and passages to right and left of you, as you pass them. These back streets are always dangerous, and especially so at night-time; therefore, if anyone should spring out at you, do not stop to parley, but hit out straight and hard. Good night!"

As it happened, Jack did not see a solitary human being until he presently emerged into one of the wider and more frequented streets; and twenty minutes later he was safely on board the *Thetis* again, to the great astonishment of Milsom, who had been pacing the deck in an endeavour to raise an appetite for dinner, and meanwhile picturing to himself the pleasant time that he supposed Jack to be having at the hacienda. He was, of course, profoundly concerned at the news which Jack had to tell him; and spent the remainder of the evening in alternately invoking sea blessings upon the head of Don Sebastian Alvaros, wondering what would happen to the Montijos should the apprehensions of their friends prove correct, and endeavouring to devise schemes for the discovery and liberation of the family.

The next morning saw Jack an early visitor at the office of the British Consul; and into the sympathetic ear of that most long-suffering official the young man poured all his woes, all his fears, all his indignation that such happenings could occur in a so-called Christian country. But the Consul could offer him very little comfort; for, as he pointed out to Jack, the affair was one concerning the Spanish Government alone, and with which he could not possibly interfere—at least officially; but he undertook to refer to the matter unofficially, at his next interview with the Capitan-General, and promised to furnish Jack with any information which he might then or upon any other occasion obtain. And with that somewhat meagre promise Master Jack was obliged to rest content. But the young man could not remain so for long; and on that and several succeeding days he wandered about the Havana streets and haunted the various cafés and restaurants in the hope of somewhere hearing a chance word which would throw a glimmer of light upon the mystery. And he also reconnoitred the jails, passing and repassing them a dozen times a day upon the off-chance that he might sooner or later catch a glimpse of one or another of his friends' faces peering out through one of the little grated openings in the walls. But all to no purpose; at the end of three weeks from the date of the disappearance the mystery remained as insoluble as ever. Nor had Don Ramon met with any better success. "I cannot understand it," exclaimed that gentleman irritably; "I have sought information in every conceivable direction, and have set all sorts of unseen forces in motion, with absolutely no result. Even the Capitan-General has drawn blank: he is ignorant—or pretends to be—of what has happened to our friends; and the most that I have been able to get out of him is the statement—which we may take for what it is worth—that he has issued no order for the arrest of any member of the Montijo family. I wish I could get hold of Alvaros, but I have not been able to run up against him; and nobody seems to know where he is, or anything about him."

It was three or four days later that Jack, by this time utterly weary and heartsick at his lack of success, entered a restaurant which was much frequented by the officers of the garrison, and, seating himself at a table, ordered second breakfast. There were not very many people in the place at the moment, but it soon began to fill up; and presently the young man's heart gave a great bound, and he felt the pulses of his temples throbbing furiously, as three officers, laughing and talking loudly, entered the place and began to look about them for a table. One of these men was Alvaros; hence Jack's emotion.

As the lad sat staring open-eyed at them, Alvaros glanced in his direction, and Jack saw the light of recognition leap into his eyes.

"See, my friends," exclaimed the Spaniard, "there is a vacant table, next to the one at which that young beast of an Englishman is sitting. Let us take it."

And therewith the trio stalked down the room, and, with a vast amount of clatter, seated themselves at the table next to the one occupied by Singleton.

"That beggar means mischief; I can see it in his eye!" thought Jack. "Well," continued he mentally, "let him do his worst; I mean mischief too, and we will see who is the better player at the game. But I must keep cool if I am to come out on top; and, who knows? the skunk may say something which will afford me a useful tip."

For a few minutes the three officers sat chatting together, and then Jack noticed that it was Alvaros and the youngest of the trio—an ensign, apparently—who did most of the talking; the third man, who was evidently a cavalryman, merely put in a word or two here and there, and seemed to be slightly disgusted at the boisterousness of his companions. Then Alvaros, who had feigned not to have recognised Jack, exclaimed:

"By the by, I must not forget to tell you a most interesting item of news. Do either of you fellows happen to know, or to have heard of, a certain Don Hermoso Montijo, who owns a large tobacco plantation in the direction of Pinar del Rio? But of course you have; everybody knows or has heard of Montijo, the richest man in Cuba—or who was until very recently; but I am afraid that his riches will never be of much use to him again. Why? Simply because the old scoundrel turns out to be hand in glove with the insurgents! He has been helping them most lavishly with money, and it is more than suspected that it is he who is responsible for the importations of arms and supplies of all sorts that have entered the island and reached the hands of the insurgents within the last six months. He even went to Europe, taking his cub of a son with him, for the purpose of procuring the most modern weapons. Every Spaniard, therefore, who falls during the operations for the suppression of the present rising will be indebted to Don Hermoso Montijo for his death. But the Government is going to give him ample time in which to repent of his sins, for he and his family sail for Fernando Po on Sunday next on board the convict steamer *El Marañon*, in the company of several other choice miseries. So we shall no longer be troubled with him or his. And as I was chiefly instrumental in laying bare his villainy, I shall, when his estates are confiscated, put in a claim for them as my reward.

"But it was not so much of him as of his daughter that I intended to tell you. Dona Isolda Montijo is universally admitted to be, beyond all question, the most lovely woman in Cuba; and for once the popular estimate is correct, as no man knows so well as I do." ("Steady, old man, steady!" said Jack to himself. "Hold tight, and clench your teeth! The blackguard is talking now with the express intention of provoking you into the commission of some overt act for which you would be sorry afterwards, and you must not allow yourself to be provoked. The infernal fool, in his anxiety to hurt you, has made you a present of what may prove to be a most valuable bit of information; but you must not allow yourself to be inveigled into a scrape of any sort, or you may not be allowed the opportunity to avail yourself of it. So keep a tight grip upon yourself, Jack Singleton, and bottle up your wrath for future use!") "When the Montijos were arrested, about a month ago," continued Don Sebastian, "I so arranged matters that they were confined in La Jacoba; and, of course, as Governor of the prison, I possessed considerable powers; thus it was not difficult—" And therewith the fellow proceeded with great gusto to tell the story of cruelty the like of which, it is to be hoped, for the credit of one's manhood, is not often repeated. And while it was telling, Jack "sat tight" and listened, storing up every vile word and every monstrous detail in his mind that he might have something to whet his vengeance upon when the time for vengeance should come. But his agitation was so evident, his distress so poignant, that Alvaros thought it would be very good fun to direct public attention to it; so, feigning to become suddenly aware of it, he swung his chair round, and exclaimed loud enough for everybody in the room to hear:

"Hillo, Señor Englishman, what is the matter with you? You appear to be upset about something. Perhaps my little story jars upon your puritanical English notions? Or perhaps it is—yes, of course you are upset about the news that you have just heard of your friends, for, now that I come to look at you, I see that you are the Englishman whom I met at Don Hermoso's house, and whom I warned to leave this island. How is it that you have not yet gone?"

"Because it pleased me to stay," answered Jack. "But I shall be leaving either to-morrow or the next day—for a short time. Now, Don Sebastian Alvaros, disgrace to the uniform that you wear, unmitigated blackguard and scoundrel, mean, contemptible coward, and, as I believe, colossal liar, listen to me! As I told you a moment ago, I am leaving Cuba within the next day or two. But I shall return, Señor; and if it should ever prove that the infamous story which you have just told is even approximately true, I will not kill you, but I will inflict upon you such a fearful punishment for your vile deed that all Cuba shall ring with it, and it shall be a warning to every man who hears the tale to beware of doing the like!"

"Bueno, bueno; well spoken, young Englishman!" cried one or two voices from amid the crowd; and several people, anticipating a fracas, started to their feet, as did Alvaros, whose features were now livid and twitching with mingled fury and fear.

"Pig of an Englishman," he exclaimed, clapping his hand on his sword hilt, "you shall die for this!" And he attempted to snatch his weapon from its sheath. But the cavalryman who had entered the place with him, and had listened in silence and with a lowering brow to his shameful story, now sprang out of his seat, and, seizing Alvaros by his shoulders, thrust him violently back into his chair, hissing between his clenched teeth:

"Silence, cochinito! Sit down, and do not dare to further disgrace your sword by drawing it on an unarmed man! I will manage this affair. Señor," turning to Jack, "you have publicly insulted an officer of the Spanish Army, and, great as has been your provocation, you must give the man satisfaction. You are an Englishman, it would appear, and it is therefore quite possible that you may have no friends here to see you through your quarrel. Should such be the case, I shall esteem myself honoured if you will permit me to place my services at your disposal. I have the pleasure to offer you my card, Señor." So saying, he produced a card-case, and, extracting a card therefrom, tendered it to Jack. Meanwhile, during the progress of the above little speech, Jack had been thinking hard. He was in for a row, after all, despite his good resolutions of a short time before; and he must carry the matter through as best he could. But since

this strange soldier was willing to stand by him and see fair play, there was certainly no need for him to further complicate matters by calling upon Don Ramon or any of the other people whose acquaintance he had made during his short stay in the island—and all of whom were, moreover, friends of Don Hermoso; while, of course, the British Consul was quite impossible. He therefore accepted the proffered card, which bore the inscription:

“Lorenzo de Albareda, Colonel.”

“5th (Madrid) Cuirassiers.”

and handed over one of his own in return.

“I accept your generous offer, Colonel, with the utmost pleasure,” he said, “and will leave myself entirely in your hands. I am at present living on board my yacht *Thetis*, which lies in the harbour, and I will arrange that my steamboat shall be in waiting for you at the custom-house steps to convey you on board, where you will find me when you shall have completed your arrangements. And now, Señor, I must leave you. *Adios*, until we meet again!”

And therewith, bowing first to his new friend, the Colonel, and then to the company at large, many of whom clapped their hands approvingly, Jack passed out of the restaurant, and made his way to Don Ramon Bergera’s house, to tell him what he had learned.

Chapter Thirteen.

Jack grows desperate.

By a lucky chance it happened that Don Ramon was at home when Jack reached the house, and the young man was accordingly conducted to the room in which his Spanish friend usually transacted his business.

At sight of his visitor Don Ramon flung down his pen and grasped Jack by the hand.

“Well,” he exclaimed, “what is it? You have picked up some news at last, I can see; and it is bad news, I fear, by the look of you. Or is it that you are ill? Por Dios, man, you look as though you might be dying! Here, sit down, and let me ring for some cognac.”

“No, no,” said Jack, “I need no cognac, or anything else, thanks; but I have just gained some news of our poor friends, and bad news it is, as you shall hear.” And thereupon he related all that had passed at the restaurant, repeating Alvaros’ words as nearly verbatim as he could remember them.

“Oh, the despicable villain, the atrocious scoundrel!” exclaimed Don Ramon, when Singleton had come to the end of his narrative. “But do you really believe that the part of his story relating to the Señorita Isolda is true? May it not be that it is merely the empty boast of an inordinately vain man? There are individuals, you know, who pride themselves on that sort of thing.”

“So I believe,” answered Jack, “though, thank God, it has never been my misfortune to be brought into contact with any of them until now. No; I am afraid that the story is only too true. The scoundrel, being Governor of the prison, would have the power to—to—do what he says he did, and the mere fact that he boasted of it seems pretty strong evidence that he also had the will. I am therefore afraid that—that—oh, hang it! this won’t do; I must pull myself together or I shall be fit for nothing.”

“That is very true,” acquiesced Don Ramon; “when a man is going out to fight another he must not allow his nerves to be upset by giving way to violent emotion. Now, have you decided upon what weapons you will fight with? Being the challenged party, you know, you have the choice of weapons.”

“Have I?” said Jack wearily. “Why, yes, of course, I suppose I have. But I have not given a ghost of a thought to the question of weapons. One thing is certain: I don’t wish to kill Alvaros, for, of course, Carlos will want to have a turn with him as soon as he can get the chance, and he would, quite rightly, be furious with me if I were to balk him. But neither do I wish him to kill me, for that would entirely upset all my plans. What I should like to do would be to give him a tremendous punishing without endangering his life. I suppose it would not be good form to choose fists as the weapons, would it?”

Don Ramon laughed. “I scarcely know whether or not it would be ‘good form’ to insist on fighting with your bare fists,” he said, “but I know that it would be most unusual. Still, I am not sure that its singularity would constitute an insuperable bar to its acceptance by the seconds. At any rate there will be no harm in offering the suggestion to de Albareda; he is a thorough good fellow all through, and you may safely leave yourself in his hands. But, if you will pardon me for saying so, my young friend, it appears to me that you are acting somewhat quixotically in sparing this blackguard in order that your friend Carlos may be able to take a hand in his punishment. If the quarrel were mine, I should choose pistols, and shoot the fellow dead, thus making sure of him. Besides, do you suppose that poor Carlos will ever have a chance to get away from Fernando Po, when once they have got him there?”

“He never will get there; neither he nor any of the rest of the family,” said Jack, his eye brightening as the thought of his great adventure came into his mind. “I have already decided what to do, so far as they are concerned. I shall follow that convict ship, and take the Montijos out of her.”

“But, my dear boy,” remonstrated Bergera, “you cannot possibly do that, you know. It would be an act of piracy on the high seas!”

“I don’t care the value of a brass button what it is,” declared Jack, “I am going to do it; and I will take my chance of

being hanged for it afterwards. But it will not be piracy, for I shall do the trick under the Cuban flag—the flag of Cuba Libre, and I shall therefore be a belligerent, not a pirate. And, as to shooting Alvaros dead—I certainly will not do that if I can possibly help it, for such a punishment as that would be altogether too light for the atrocious crime of which he has been guilty, upon his own confession.”

“Very well,” said Don Ramon; “you must do as you please, both in that and the other matter, for I see that you have already made up your mind in both cases. I am glad that you came straight to me with your news, although it is of such a dreadful character: for, now that we have Alvaros’ statements that our poor, unhappy friends are in La Jacoba, and that they are to leave for Fernando Po on Sunday, I shall know how and where to prosecute my enquiries; and it is very essential that we should assure ourselves of the truth of both statements, otherwise your attempt at rescue may miss fire, after all. Now, I suppose you will fight that villain to-morrow morning at daybreak. If so, do me the favour of coming here to early breakfast with me at eight o’clock; you can then tell me what has happened, and I, for my part, shall by that time be in a position to tell you definitely how much of Alvaros’ story is true.”

“Certainly,” answered Jack; “I will come with pleasure. And meanwhile I suppose I ought to be getting back to the yacht, to be ready to receive de Albareda. So, good-bye! See you to-morrow.”

It was nearly three o’clock when Singleton reached the *Thetis*; but in answer to his enquiries he was informed that no stranger had visited the ship. He therefore spent the entire afternoon in posting Milsom on the position of affairs generally, and discussing with him Jack’s plan for the rescue of the Montijos from the convict steamer; which plan, by the way, Milsom pronounced to be quite feasible, stating that, like Jack, he was fully prepared to go through with it, piracy or not. And therewith he began to congratulate himself upon his foresight in employing his spare time in the preparation of his wonderful disguise for the yacht, an opportunity to use which he had been awaiting with steadily-growing impatience.

It was past five o’clock when the steam pinnace appeared approaching the yacht, with de Albareda in the stern-sheets; and that officer explained his delay by stating that he had been obliged to go on duty during the afternoon, and had only just escaped therefrom. He plunged at once into the business on hand by reminding Jack that the choice of weapons was his, and asking him whether he had yet decided what he would use. He was at first inclined to be somewhat annoyed when Jack explained with earnestness that he would prefer to fight with fists only, for he was a man who had a profound respect for the duello, which he considered ought to be conducted with all due formality and dignity; but finally burst into a fit of hearty laughter at the absurdity—as he regarded it—of two men attempting to settle a serious quarrel by pommelling each other like a brace of schoolboys. He admitted that, if Jack chose to insist upon fists as weapons, he would be strictly within his rights, but dwelt, as Don Ramon also had done, upon the unusual character of such a demand, and strongly hinted at his own partiality for pistols; whereupon Jack gracefully conceded the point and agreed that pistols it should be. The remaining details were speedily settled, the hour arranged being sunrise on the following morning, and the place the Botanical Gardens. Then de Albareda went ashore again to interview Alvaros’ second and apprise him of the nature of the arrangements, promising to return to the yacht in time for dinner, and spend the night on board. And a very pleasant, genial fellow he proved to be; and a very agreeable evening Jack, Milsom, and he spent together.

There are many more cheerful places in the world than the Havana Botanical Gardens just at sunrise, for at that hour the mists lie chill and heavy upon the ground, the grass is saturated with dew, and the numerous trees not only freely bespatter everything beneath their widespreading branches with copious showers of dewdrops, as the wind sweeps through them, but many of them have a trick of assuming a singularly weird and uncanny appearance in the first faint light of the early dawn; yet Jack felt quite happy, not to say exhilarated, as he and his friend the Colonel of Cuirassiers stepped briskly along the dew-sodden gravel paths on their way to the rendezvous, which was an open, grassy space in the south-west corner of the Gardens. Albareda had been assiduously coaching his principal, ever since leaving the yacht, in the etiquette of the duello as observed by the Spanish army, until he considered that he had made his companion letter-perfect; and now he was giving Jack a few last words of caution and admonition before standing him up to be shot at.

“There is no doubt in my mind,” said he, “that Alvaros intends to kill you, if he can; for what you said to him yesterday has evidently sunk into his mind and made him afraid of you. Therefore you must be careful to fire sharp upon the word, or he will have you, for—to give the fellow his due—he is rather a neat and quick hand with the pistol. The word will be given thus: ‘One—two—three!’ and at the word ‘three’ you must pull trigger. And I should recommend you to look him straight between the eyes from the moment that you are posted, otherwise he may attempt to play some trick with you, such as firing a fraction of a second before the proper time, or something of that sort. Ah, here we are, first on the ground, thank goodness, with a full two minutes to spare! Only just managed it, however, for”—looking back along the path by which they had come—“here come the other fellows, and the surgeon with them. How are you feeling? Quite cool and comfortable? Good; that is excellent!”

The conditions were simple: the duellists were to exchange not more than three shots, at a distance of twelve paces, and were to fire at the word of command; and at the last moment it was agreed, at Albareda’s suggestion, that if either of the combatants fired before the word of command, he was to be penalised by his antagonist being given the privilege of an extra shot at him. It was evident to all that this condition was exceedingly distasteful to Alvaros; yet he could not complain, or refuse its acceptance, since it imposed no hardship whatever upon the man who intended to fight fair. These matters being arranged, the ground was selected, the utmost care being taken that neither combatant had the slightest advantage over the other in the matter of light; the distance was paced off, and the men placed.

“Now,” said Albareda, who was to give the word, “I shall count three steadily, thus: ‘One—two—three!’ and at the word ‘three’—but not before, remember—you may pull trigger. Now, are you both quite ready? Then—one—two—three!”

Jack most carefully observed every one of the instructions given him by his second, including that which referred to

looking his antagonist steadily between the eyes, and he quickly saw that this simple proceeding had a most disconcerting effect upon Alvaros, whose return gaze at once became shifty and uncertain; the result being that the Spaniard's bullet flew wide, while Jack's, aimed by a hand as steady as a rock, struck Alvaros' right elbow, completely shattering the bone and inflicting an injury that the surgeon, at a first glance, thought would probably stiffen the arm for the remainder of its owner's life, to the extent of very seriously disabling him. Under these circumstances Alvaros' second expressed himself satisfied, and declined any further shots; whereupon Jack and his friend left the ground and went their respective ways, Jack back to the yacht, and the Colonel of Cuirassiers to his quarters.

By the time that Jack got back on board the *Thetis* it was nearly seven o'clock, and the crew were busily engaged in performing the ship's toilet for the day, spreading the awnings, and so on; he therefore retired to the interior of the deck-house with Milsom, and arranged with that individual that he should spend the day in filling the bunkers "chock-a-block" with coal, taking in fresh water, laying in a supply of fresh meat, vegetables, and fruit for sea, and generally preparing to go out of harbour on the following day. Then, a thought suddenly striking him, he wired to Calderon, directing him to pack and dispatch forthwith to the yacht all the wearing apparel of every description that he could find, belonging to any of the members of the Montijo family; the boxes to arrive at Havana next day, without fail, not later than by the mid-day train. This done, he hurried away to keep his breakfast appointment with Don Ramon Bergera, whom he found awaiting him in a somewhat anxious frame of mind lest anything untoward should have resulted from the duel. Reassured on this point, Don Ramon chatted with Jack upon indifferent subjects until breakfast was served and the servants had been dismissed, when he said:

"You are no doubt anxious to learn the result of the enquiries into the truth of Alvaros' story which I undertook to make, yesterday afternoon. Well, I can tell you this: I have ascertained, beyond all possibility of doubt, that the Montijos are, as that scoundrel stated, in La Jacoba; and also that they are all to be shipped off to Fernando Po by the steamer *El Marañon*, which steamer is appointed to leave the harbour on Sunday next. But by whose authority they are being thus summarily dealt with, I cannot understand, or ascertain; the only thing which is quite certain being that they have not been tried or convicted publicly. That, however, is nothing, for it is common knowledge that scores—indeed, I may say hundreds—of people who have been suspected of disloyalty to the Government have mysteriously vanished, from time to time, and have never again been heard of. In the light of what we now know, however, there is little doubt in my mind that they have all been sent either to Ceuta or to Fernando Po. Poor Cuba! She is indeed a downtrodden country, and it is little wonder that her people are at last rising up in arms against the atrocious system of tyranny and misgovernment under which they are groaning. The Capitan-General is a good man, and means well, I believe: but he is weak, and is moreover hampered and embarrassed to the point of helplessness by the multiplicity of impossible instructions which he receives from home; and, furthermore, he is in the hands of a number of unscrupulous, overbearing subordinates who have arrogated to themselves almost autocratic powers, and who act upon their own responsibility, without consulting him. I believe this is what has occurred in the case of the Montijos: this fellow Alvaros has somehow managed to work himself into a position of very considerable power, and I have little doubt that he, and he only, is responsible for the whole shameful business, which, in my opinion, has been neither more nor less than a determined but unsuccessful attempt to force the unhappy Señorita Isolda into a marriage with him!"

"Well," said Jack grimly, "he is going to repent of that business in sackcloth and ashes before he dies; he has received his first instalment of punishment this morning, and there is more in store for him!"

"By the way," said Don Ramon, "what do you propose to do with the Montijos when you have rescued them, in the event of this mad scheme of yours proving successful?"

"Oh," said Jack, "I haven't thought of that, thus far! Of course it will be for Don Hermoso to decide where he will go and what he will do when we have got him and his safely out of the convict ship. I imagine that he will be anxious to return to his own place and take care of his property, if he can. But, if not, he can always find safety in Jamaica."

"Y-es," assented Don Ramon doubtfully; "that is of course all right, so far as it goes. But the chances are that Alvaros' next move will be to procure the confiscation of Don Hermoso's property, and secure its possession to himself. Now, just let us consider that point for a moment. Should that happen, what will poor Don Hermoso do?"

"I know what I should do in such a case," said Jack. "I should return to my property, and if Alvaros happened to be in possession of it—well, it would be so much the worse for Alvaros, that's all! I tell you, Don Ramon, that in the struggle which is just now beginning in this island, it is the bold, strong men who are going to 'come out on top', as the Yankees say; and in the course of the next month or two the Spanish Government will have its hands so full that it will have no time to deal with individuals."

"Yes," said Don Ramon with decision, "I believe you are quite right there, my young friend, and probably the most daring policy will be the safest for all Cubans to pursue. Yes, there are possibilities in that idea of yours, I believe; but I must think it over at greater leisure than I have to spare for it just now. Meanwhile, it will manifestly be very advantageous for Don Hermoso to know precisely how affairs stand, and what are the latest developments, before he attempts to return to his home. I will therefore— By the way, how long do you anticipate that it will take you to effect the rescue?"

"Quite impossible to say," answered Jack. "The *Marañon* will no doubt keep the Cuban coast close aboard until she gets as far east as, say, Cavana Point, and then steer about midway between Great Inagua and Hayti, keeping to the southward of all the banks, and so passing into the open Atlantic, probably 'taking her departure', in the navigator's sense of the term, from Cape Viejo Français, on the northern coast of Hayti, and striking thence, as straight across as she can go, to Fernando Po. It is my intention to go to sea to-morrow, or next day, perhaps, and lie in wait for her; after which I shall follow her at a sufficient distance to avoid arousing the suspicions of the captain, and pounce upon her at the first favourable opportunity that presents itself. But probably, if all goes well with us, they will be free again in a fortnight from to-day."

"Upon my word," said Don Ramon, laughing, "it is positively exhilarating to hear the confident tone in which you talk; you are actually inveigling me into the indulgence of some sort of ridiculous hope that your enterprise will be successful! Now, let us talk for a moment or two as though that hope were going to be realised. When you have accomplished the rescue of our friends, you had better put into some Cuban port where your yacht is not known, and communicate with me by telegraph. Now, what would be the best place for you to call at?"

"Really," said Jack, "I don't think it matters very much; the *Thetis* has been into practically every port in Cuba, but that is no reason why she should not enter any of them again. For you must remember that it will be some time before the escape of the Montijo family is known; probably not until the *Marañon* has travelled all the way to Fernando Po and back—if she is indeed to return to Havana, which, by the way, is by no means certain. How would Guantanamo do?"

"Guantanamo would do very well indeed," answered Don Ramon. "Yes; Guantanamo let it be. Now, the next matter to be considered is the question of a cipher in which to communicate, for of course it goes without saying that a cipher of some sort must be used; it would never do for such treasonable correspondence as we have in our minds to be carried on in plain language, capable of being understood by every telegraph clerk or letter-sorter through whose hands it may chance to pass. You don't happen to be acquainted with any first-class cipher, I suppose?"

"Yes, I do, if I can but recall it to mind," said Jack. "I met with it in a book some time ago, and it struck me as being especially good from the fact that it consisted entirely of figures, and that it was not necessary to use precisely the same figures every time to represent any particular letter; hence it seems impossible for anyone to decipher it without the key. Now, let me consider: how did it go? Something like this, I think. Can you let me have a pencil and a sheet of paper?"

Don Ramon produced the articles required, and Singleton set to work with them. Presently he glanced up with an exclamation of satisfaction. "Yes," he said, "that is right; I thought I had not forgotten it. This is how it goes:" and he proceeded to explain the system to Don Ramon.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the latter; "nothing could be better, for it is absolutely safe. Very well, Señor, we will use this cipher, then, in communicating with each other; and you will wire to me upon your arrival at Guantanamo. Meanwhile, I will make it my business to watch the course of events here, and be prepared to furnish you with all the news as soon as I hear of your return. Now, is there anything else remaining to be arranged?"

They both considered for several minutes, and at length came to the conclusion that there was not. Whereupon, breakfast having been by this time dispatched, Jack rose and took his leave, laden down with kind and encouraging messages for the Montijos, to be delivered when the rescue of the family should have been accomplished.

From Don Ramon's house Jack made his way to the British Consulate, where he bade farewell to the Consul, explaining to that gentleman that he was tired of shore life, and intended to go to sea for a change; and that, further, he did not in the least know whether he should return, or whether he should decide to go home.

"If you will take my advice, young gentleman," said the Consul, "you will go home—and stay there; or, at least, you will stay away from Cuba until all these troubles are over."

Jack promised that he would give that advice his most careful consideration; after which he bade his fellow-countryman adieu, and made his way aboard the yacht, where Milsom was found busily arranging to take the *Thetis* alongside a coal hulk as soon as the water lighter had cast off. The remainder of that day was a busy time for both men, for Milsom still had his clearance to effect, and all the stores to receive; while Jack spent the afternoon at the railway station awaiting the arrival of the baggage, the due dispatch of which Calderon had notified to him by telegraph. It arrived late in the afternoon, and was taken straight aboard the yacht, where it was placed at haphazard in the cabins lately occupied by the various members of the Montijo family. Then, when at length the bustle of preparation was ended, and the yacht was in condition to leave at a moment's notice, Jack and Milsom adjourned to the chart-house to discuss those matters which were to ensue upon the departure of the *Thetis* from Havana harbour.

"Now," said Singleton, as he took from a drawer in the chart case a large-scale chart of Cuba, and laid it on top of the case, "how long do you suppose it will take you to effect the transmogrification of this ship by means of that disguise of yours?"

"Well," answered Milsom, "seeing that I have never yet rigged the arrangement, I am not prepared to say, to half an hour or so, just how long it will take. I reckon that, under favourable conditions, it ought to be done in about four hours; but, to make all certain, suppose we call it twelve hours. That ought to suffice and at the same time leave a sufficient margin for any small alterations that may be necessary. You seem just a little bit inclined to sneer at my 'wonderful' disguise, Master Jack; but you had better wait until you have seen it before you do that. I venture to remind you that I am a Navy man, and, as such, I know a thing or two about disguising ships: I've had a little experience in that direction during the carrying out of manoeuvres; and I am prepared to make a bet that if you—not knowing anything about the arrangement, mind you—were to pass this vessel, in her disguised condition, within half a mile, you would never recognise her."

"All right, Phil, old chap, don't get your back up! I'll take your word for it that the thing is all right," said Jack. "And if I seemed to speak disparagingly of your contrivance, forgive me, old man, will you? I've had a good deal to worry me lately, and I'm afraid that both my nerves and my temper are a bit on edge; but I daresay I shall feel better when we get to sea again and can start to circumvent the Spanish Government, or at least that part of it which is responsible for the misrule and shameful injustice which are rampant in Cuba. Now, I think I understood you to say that you require quiet water to enable you to rig this disguising arrangement, so I propose to go to sea to-morrow—which will be Thursday—and run down the coast to the eastward in search of a secluded spot in which we can effect our transformation without being interfered with or overlooked by anybody. Now, let us have a look at the chart."

"There ought not to be very much difficulty in finding a suitable spot," remarked Milsom, as the pair bent over the sheet. "Ah," he continued, laying his finger upon the paper, "here we are! This should be a perfectly ideal place; just sufficient water, a lee to shelter under, and very little likelihood of being disturbed at our work. We can go in here through the Boca de Sagua la Grande, haul up to the south-east, and come to anchor in this little bight in two and a quarter fathoms of water. And when our preparations are complete we can go out to sea again by way of the Boca de Maravillas, thus avoiding the observation of the people who tend the light on Hicacal Cay, who will be sure to notice us as we go in. By the way, I picked up a rather useful little item of information while I was ashore this afternoon. I fell in with the harbour-master, who seems quite a decent sort of chap, as Spaniards go; he and I have gradually grown to be rather chummy since we have been in harbour here, and upon the strength of the fact that I was clearing for sea I took him into that place on the quay yonder and cracked a farewell bottle of wine with him. As we emptied the bottle we yarned together upon various topics; and by and by he made some casual mention of the *Marañon*, to which I replied by saying that she had the appearance of being rather a fast vessel, and that I thought it a pity that her skipper did not take a little more pride in her appearance and smarten her up a bit by giving her a lick of paint occasionally. He shrugged his shoulders and asked: What would I? The ship was a convict ship, and her appearance was a matter of no consequence. As to her speed, she could steam twelve knots, but her most economical speed was eight, and he opined that eight knots would therefore be her pace on the trip to Fernando Po, for which reason he rather pitied the unfortunate convicts who were doomed to travel in her, for she had the reputation of being a most uneasy ship in a seaway. I also ascertained from him that she is timed to sail at two o'clock on Sunday afternoon, which should bring her off our hiding-place about—let me see—yes, about seven o'clock on Monday morning. Now, if her skipper should chance to keep the coast pretty close aboard, as he possibly may, we ought to catch a glimpse of her from our masthead as she goes past: but if, on the other hand, he should push her off into mid-channel, to get the full benefit of the current, I think our best plan will be to allow her, say, four hours for delay in starting, and then follow until we sight her, when our further actions can be governed by circumstances. So I have instructed Perkins to pass the word round among the deck hands for everybody to take a good look at her, so that they may know her again when they see her."

"Good!" exclaimed Jack. "That is excellent; the news is well worth a bottle of wine. You don't think, I suppose, that your friend had any suspicion of our intention, and deliberately told you all that for the purpose of misleading you?"

"Not he," answered Milsom confidently; "he is too simple a chap to conceive any such suspicion as that. Besides, why should he? We have done nothing to lead even the most suspicious Spaniard to connect our departure with that of *E/ Marañon*. Oh, no! what he told me slipped out in the most casual way in the ordinary course of conversation, and you may be sure that I was particularly careful not to question him, or to say anything which might lead him to suppose that I took the least interest in the movements of the ship."

"Well," said Jack, "we must hope for the best; but I am horribly anxious, Phil, lest anything should go wrong with this scheme of ours. So much depends upon its success, you know. By the way, what about a pilot for this place where we are going to transform the ship? How shall we manage about him?"

"We shall not need to 'manage' at all," answered Milsom, "for the simple reason that we shall not take a pilot. If we get under way at about eight o'clock to-morrow morning we shall reach our destination with several hours of daylight in hand; and with the help of this chart, a hand aloft on the foremast, and two leadsmen in the forechains, I will guarantee to take this little hooker in and out of that berth without so much as scratching her paint. Oh, no, we shall not take a pilot, who might possibly go back to Havana and set people wondering what the mischief was our object in slipping in behind Esquivel del Norte cay!"

Chapter Fourteen.

The rescue.

With all due observance of the courtesies of the sea the graceful, white-hulled *Thetis* dipped a farewell salute to the Spanish warships in Havana harbour as she next morning swept past them, outward bound, shortly after nine o'clock in the morning of a glorious April day. Jack was on the navigating bridge with Milsom, and as the beautiful little ship, looking as spick and span as though just fresh from the stocks, and with all her brasswork gleaming and flashing like burnished gold in the brilliant morning sunlight, brought the lighthouse abeam and gaily plunged her keen, shapely bows into the heart of the first blue, wind-whipped, foam-crested surge that met her, and in joyous greeting playfully flung a shower of diamond-tinted spray over her starboard cathead, the young man sighed a sigh of relief, and flung from his shoulders the heavy load of care and anxiety that had of late been wearing him down a great deal more than he knew or even suspected: for now, at last, the expedition that meant so much to him had actually begun, and very soon he would know the best and the worst that was to be known; and perhaps, after all, the worst might prove to be not nearly so bad as he had been led to believe. Alvaros, he was convinced, was not only a blatant braggart, but also an unmitigated liar, and it might be that the foul deed of which he had boasted had never happened, and that the boast was merely another lie.

Milsom, regarding his companion with a sympathetic eye, noted how Jack straightened up and flung back his shoulders like a fighter preparing for the fray, and how his eye brightened and his cheek flushed as the strong, salt breeze met his nostrils and swept into his lungs, exhilarating as a draught of wine—and chuckled, for he knew now that the worst was over, and that the collapse which he had been half-dreading would not now come. As for himself, he was as happy as a man can be who is unable to forget that a calamity has befallen certain of his friends. But he was a keen, light-hearted sailor, intensely fond of his profession, and he was now fairly started upon an expedition that very strongly appealed to his professional instincts; he felt like a hunter, and the exhilarating excitement of stalking and running down his prey tended to very largely obliterate the memory of everything else. And he was throwing himself heart and soul into this mad undertaking of Jack's for the deliverance of their friends; he saw the difficulty and recognised the extreme danger of the adventure, and with keen zest he laid himself out to conquer the

one and evade the other. Even now, when the yacht had but barely cleared the harbour mouth, he adopted his first ruse for the mystification of the foe, for he understood that it was quite possible that some curious eye might follow the course of the vessel and possibly suspect something if it were seen that she was going the same road that the convict steamer would be following a few days later; he therefore instructed the helmsman to make a very wide and gradual sweep to the eastward, hauling up almost imperceptibly at the rate of a point every quarter of an hour, and thus rendering it absolutely impossible for an observer to guess whether the *Thetis* was going out through the Florida Strait or down the Nicholas and Old Bahama channels. Also, for the first hour he allowed her to travel at the sober pace of fourteen knots; after which he spoke down the voice tube to Macintyre in the engine-room, and the next instant the little craft was shearing through the long, foam-flecked surges like a chasing dolphin, as the Scotchman gave her all the steam that her engines could take.

It was about seven bells in the afternoon watch when, the yacht running in toward the land on a south-easterly course, the head of the mast from which the light on Hicacal Cay is shown appeared dead ahead, and Milsom at once gave orders for the engines to be slowed down to fourteen knots. Then, turning to Jack, he said: "Now, young man, I shall want your assistance, for I am going to personally undertake the job of piloting the little hooker into her hiding-place. The chart still lies spread out on the chart-house table, where we left it last night, and with that before you you ought to be able to con the ship into the Boca without the slightest difficulty. Once she is there, I will take charge again, and give you my directions from the fore-masthead, whither I am about to go; and I shall want you to stand by the engine-room telegraph and transmit my orders to the engine-room smartly. You had better keep that mast yonder fair and square over the bowsprit end until the Boca opens out clearly; then you can ease your helm over to port and head her straight in. Now, I'm off."

And, therewith, Milsom left the bridge and ran down on to the fore deck, from which he was presently hoisted to the fore-masthead in a boatswain's chair bent on to a whip rove through the sheave-hole at the masthead. By the time that he was up there the low, mangrove-clothed cays were visible from the bridge; then Jack gave orders for the helm to be ported, and a quarter of an hour later the yacht shot into smooth water between Bushy and Hicacal Cays, and Milsom took in hand the conning of the craft, following the trend of the channel by eye from his lofty lookout, with a couple of leadsmen in the forechains to further help him. But there was no difficulty, for, once inside the cays, the water was both smooth and clear, and Milsom was able to follow unerringly the line of deepest water. As he had anticipated, the unwonted spectacle of so trim and handsome a little vessel as the *Thetis* attracted the interested attention not only of the lightkeepers but also of the fishermen inhabiting the little cluster of huts near the cottage of the former; but that could not be helped, and, after all, they probably concluded that the yacht was bound to Sagua la Grande, and would think no more about her. And a quarter of an hour later she had slipped round a projecting point, out of sight, and was safely riding at anchor in her hiding-place.

As Milsom had foreseen, they reached their destination with some hours of daylight in hand, and the moment that the anchor was down all hands went to work and routed out from the secret recesses of the ship a heterogeneous assortment of light iron rods, bars, angles, and sheets; wood framing and planking; and great rolls of canvas, painted a light, smoky-grey tint, which Milsom asserted would render a vessel practically invisible at a distance of three miles, and the precise composition of which had cost him weeks of anxious thought and study. Then the crew were divided into three gangs; and while one party busied itself, under Macintyre, in sorting out, bolting together, and fixing in position those portions which were to effect a transformation in the appearance of the yacht's bows, another party, under Milsom, was similarly employed in altering the appearance of the vessel's handsome stern, and the third party, under Perkins, was clothing the brightly varnished masts in tight-fitting canvas coats, painted in the all-pervading grey which was to be the colour of the vessel when the work of disguising her should be complete; fixing a bogus fighting top on the ship's foremast; enclosing the chart-house in a casing which should give it the semblance of a conning tower; getting a couple of light signalling yards aloft; and painting the several boats grey. When the men knocked off work at sunset, a great deal had been done; but it was not until six bells in the forenoon watch next day that the work of transformation was finally completed to Milsom's satisfaction, and then the *Thetis*—temporarily rechristened the *Libertad*—so strongly resembled a modern two-funnelled torpedo gunboat that she might easily have deceived even a professional eye at a distance of half a mile; and when, further, a long pennant flaunted itself from the main truck, and the flag of Cuba Libre waved from the ensign staff, the gallant skipper, critically surveying his transmogrified ship from the dinghy, confidently announced that he would defy anybody to trace the most remote resemblance between the vessel upon which his eyes rested and the trim English yacht which had steamed out of Havana harbour on the previous day.

On the following Monday morning at daylight the furnace fires were lighted on board the disguised yacht, and at the same time a man with sharp eyes was sent aloft to the fore-masthead to watch the offing over the tops of the low mangrove trees, and give notice of the passage of the *Marañon*, should she happen to heave in sight; but hour after hour passed with no sign of her, unless one of the eastward-going trails of smoke that showed on the horizon during the forenoon happened to emanate from her. They waited patiently until noon, and then, nothing having been seen of the convict ship, Jack and Milsom agreed that it was quite useless to wait any longer; and half an hour later the fishermen outside the Boca de Maravillas were astonished to see a craft, which some of them described as a cruiser, while the others spoke of her as a gunboat, sweep through the passage and head away north-east, as though to clear the eastern extremity of Cay Sal Bank on her way northward through the Santaren Channel. The vessel showed no colours, but was flying a pennant, and the general opinion was that she was an American man-o'-war; though what she had been doing in Sagua la Grande harbour, or how she had got there, nobody seemed able to guess.

But although, to the unsophisticated fishermen of Sagua la Grande, the mysterious warship appeared to be bound north, she was really bound south-east through the Nicholas and Old Bahama channels: and when the yacht had made an offing of some fifteen miles—by which time she was of course out of sight of the fishermen's boats, Milsom ordered the helm to be ported and the engines sent full speed ahead, she having by that time run on to a line which the ex-Navy man had pencilled on his chart as the probable course of the convict steamer; and if that craft had left Havana at the hour arranged, and were steaming at the rate which the harbour-master had anticipated would be her pace, she must now be nearly sixty miles ahead. That was a fairly long lead, certainly; but there is a big difference

between a speed of eight knots and that of twenty-four, and Milsom calculated that, if the *Marañon* were really ahead of them, they ought to overtake her in something like three hours. As a matter of fact, they sighted the craft dead ahead about five bells in the afternoon watch, identified her to their entire satisfaction about half an hour later, and passed her, some sixteen miles to the southward, about one bell in the first "dog."

"Now," said Milsom, when he came down from aloft after personally satisfying himself as to the identity of the great, dirty-white, rust-streaked hull crawling along in the northern board, "let me make a little calculation. Our plan is to appear ahead of her, steaming to the northward and westward—to meet her, in fact, instead of overtaking her; and the proper time to do this will be about a quarter of an hour before sunset. I take it that she is steaming at about the pace which my friend the harbour-master allowed her—that is to say, about eight knots. At that rate she will be about eight miles farther to the eastward at a quarter of an hour before sunset. That means that—um—um—yes, that will be about right. Now, Jack, my hearty, cheer up! for unless something goes very radically wrong with our scheme, our friends ought to be safe and snug aboard this dandy little hooker in a couple of hours' time. Now, it is you, my friend, who are going to play the giddy pirate and wrest our friends, at the sword's point, out of the hands of the oppressor, so cut away down below, my lad, and get into your disguise; and while you are doing that the deck hands can be doing the same, so as to render it impossible for them to be identified at any future time, should they be met in the streets of Havana, or elsewhere, by anybody belonging to the *Marañon*."

Half an hour later Jack re-appeared on deck, his already well-bronzed face and hands stained to the darkness of a mulatto's skin, and his corpus arrayed in an old, weather-stained, and very-much-the-worse-for-wear Spanish naval lieutenant's uniform, which Don Ramon had caused one of his servants to procure for him at a second-hand wardrobe dealer's in Havana; his disguise being completed by the addition of a black wig and a ferocious moustache and whiskers, obtained through the same channel at a theatrical wig-maker's shop. To say that his own mother would not have known him in this get-up is to put the matter altogether inadequately; and his appearance on deck was the signal for a roar of mingled admiration and mirth from all hands. Meanwhile, the crew had pinned their faith to burnt cork and their working slops as a disguise, except the five who were to form Jack's boat's crew; these having discarded their working slops and donned dungaree overalls, ancient cloth trousers, rusty with salt-water stains, and stiff with tar and grease, big thigh-boots, and worsted caps. A cutlass belted to the waist, and a knife and brace of revolvers in the belt gave the finishing touch of realism to the get-up, and obviated any possibility of doubt as to the seriousness of their mission.

By this time the moment had arrived when, according to Milsom's calculations, the yacht ought to be turned round to meet the *Marañon*, now out of sight astern; the helm was accordingly put hard over, and the nimble little craft swept round until she was heading direct for the spot where it had been calculated that the two ships should meet. No combination of circumstances could possibly have been more favourable for the adventure than were those at that moment prevailing. There was no craft of any description in sight as far as the eye could see; the trade wind was blowing quite a moderate breeze; and the sea was not sufficiently formidable to render the task of transferring the rescued people from one ship to the other by means of an open boat at all difficult or dangerous. Moreover, the sun, fast dropping toward the horizon, was quickly losing his intensity of light, and as rapidly plunging all objects into a delicious soft golden haze, in which all detail was lost; it was therefore in the highest degree unlikely that even the keenest eye on board the convict steamer would be able to detect the imposition that was being practised upon them.

Presently, a smudge of brown smoke soaring above the horizon broad on the port bow showed that the unsuspecting quarry was approaching; and a minute or two later her masts, fine as spiders' webs, began to rise against the warm, golden glow of the western sky, then her funnel appeared, and finally her bridge and chart-house—appearing as completely detached and isolated objects in the rarefied atmosphere—suddenly showed themselves on the horizon, alternately appearing and disappearing with the rise and fall of the ship over the swell. Then Milsom rang down to the engine-room for half speed; and a little later, when the *Marañon* was hull-up and the two vessels were closing fast, he ordered the forward port twelve-pound quick-firer to be loaded with a blank charge. Then, when the two craft were about a mile apart, he ordered the Cuban flag to be run up to the main gaff-end, and the gun to be fired as a polite invitation to the other craft to heave-to, at the same time stopping his own engines.

Apparently the skipper of the *Marañon* did not know what to make of it; for, beyond hoisting Spanish colours, he took no notice of the summons, making no attempt to stop his engines.

"Mr Perkins," shouted Milsom, "just heave a shot across that chap's fore-foot, will ye? and we will see whether he understands that language. But for goodness' sake take care that you don't hit him by mistake. We don't want to have the destruction of that vessel on our consciences."

Bang! barked the twelve-pounder for the second time, and there was now a vicious tone in the bark which said unmistakably that the gun was shotted; while, if anybody on board the *Marañon* had any doubt about it, that doubt was a moment later dispelled by the sudden up-leaping of a fountain of foam some twenty fathoms ahead of the vessel. That proved conclusively that the mysterious gunboat flying the Cuban flag was in no humour to be trifled with; and the Spanish captain, objurgating vehemently, rang down for his engines to stop. Thereupon the "gunboat", which by this time had swung round, presenting a view of her stern, with the name *Libertad* emblazoned upon it in gold letters, lowered a boat, into which four seamen, a coxswain, and a big, black-bearded officer dropped. When the frail craft, propelled by the four sturdy oarsmen, pushed off, and went dancing, light as an empty eggshell, over the purple swell toward the convict ship, the officers on the bridge of which did not fail to note that the crew of the stranger had carefully trained two long, beautifully polished guns and a couple of Maxims on them, "as a gentle hint that there was to be no nonsense," as Milsom put it.

Meanwhile, the crew of the *Marañon*, seeing the boat approaching, busied themselves with the task of lowering their side ladder, which they got into position just as the boat dashed alongside and her crew tossed their oars. Although the swell was by no means high, the convict ship rolled heavily upon it as soon as she lost her way, and Jack had to watch his opportunity to spring out of the boat on to the ladder without accident; but he managed it cleverly, and the

next moment stood upon the deck of the *Marañon*, where he found the captain of the ship and his chief officer awaiting him. As he stepped in through the gangway he courteously lifted his cap in salute; but the other man was far too angry to acknowledge or return the salute. Instead, he made a step forward, with corrugated brow and clenched fist, and exclaimed:

“Señor, I demand to know the reason of this outrage! Who are you; and why have you dared to stop my ship upon the high seas?”

By way of reply to the man’s menacing demeanour, Jack allowed his left hand to drop on to the butt of one of the pair of revolvers which he carried in his belt. And, instead of answering the very reasonable question which had been put to him, he said:

“Captain, I greatly regret to trouble you, but I must ask you to have the goodness to muster your prisoners on deck. Please do it at once; for the light will soon be gone, and I am anxious to complete my; business with you before the darkness falls.”

“Muster my prisoners on deck?” stormed the captain. “For what reason, Señor? And again I ask, Who are you; and by what authority—?”

Jack raised his hand deprecatingly. “My good sir,” he exclaimed, “why waste time in asking foolish and useless questions, when I have already intimated to you that I am in a hurry? Will you have the very great goodness—and, I may add, the wisdom—to comply with my request? Or will you compel me to shoot you, in the hope that this gentleman—who, I presume, is your chief officer—will be more reasonable and obliging than yourself?”

This hint had the desired effect; the skipper turned away, and, giving certain instructions to his companion, made his way up on to the bridge again, while the other went below. Ten minutes later the prisoners, under the charge of a strong guard of soldiers, began to make their way up on deck; and presently the officer who had gone below to carry out the skipper’s instructions re-appeared, with the information that the prisoners were now all paraded forward, and ready for the inspection which he presumed the Señor wished to make of them. Whereupon Jack, calling the coxswain up out of the boat alongside for the purpose of keeping an eye upon things generally, and seeing that no trickery was attempted, went forward to the fore deck, where about three hundred men, women, and children were drawn up in four lines or ranks, two on each side of the deck. The chief officer, or mate, accompanied him.

The first face he recognised was that of his friend and chum Carlos, but oh, how shockingly changed! The poor fellow was thin as a skeleton, ghastly pale under the almost vanished tan of the sun, dirty, dishevelled, and in rags. But that was not the most shocking change that Jack noticed in him; it was the look of mingled fear, hate, and horror that gleamed in the young man’s eyes, the kind of look that tells of systematic and long-continued cruelty.

“Take him aft,” said Jack to the officer who was attending him, laying his hand lightly on Carlos’ shoulder as he spoke; and he noted with horror how, as he lifted his hand, the poor youth shrank and cowered, as though he expected to be struck. Then presently he came to Señora Montijo, who, poor soul, looked into Jack’s face vacantly and laughed, as he directed her, too, to be taken aft! It was clear that she was quite mad; and Jack ground his teeth as he inwardly vowed fresh vows of vengeance against the infamous ruffian who was the author of such unspeakable misery and ruin. A little farther on he found Don Hermoso, whose condition seemed even worse than that of his son. But the Señorita Isolda he could not find, although he searched the remainder of the prisoners twice over. Then he walked aft to where Don Hermoso and his wife and son were standing listlessly together, exchanging an occasional word or two with each other, but apparently too utterly wretched to take notice of anything, or to engage in continuous conversation.

Jack addressed himself to Carlos, in English. “Carlos, old chap,” he said, “don’t start, or look surprised, or appear to recognise me; but you know me, old fellow, don’t you? I am Jack—Jack Singleton; that is the yacht over yonder, disguised as a gunboat; and I have come to take you all away out of this wretched ship, and restore you to your home. But I cannot find your sister. Is she not with you?”

This apparently simple question had the most extraordinary effect upon Don Hermoso and Carlos. The former, suddenly dropping his face in his hands, began to sob and moan hysterically, while Carlos as suddenly dropped on his knees on the deck, and, lifting his clenched hands skyward, began to call down bitter curses upon the head of Alvaros.

Jack shuddered as he listened, and again ground his teeth in impotent fury, for he soon gathered, from his friend’s wild words, that the cruelty of which the Spaniard had boasted had indeed been true. But he could gather no information as to the whereabouts of Señorita Isolda from the now frenzied ravings of her brother; and it was only with the utmost difficulty that he at length drew from Don Hermoso the dreadful tidings that his daughter, who had been brought on board the ship a raving maniac, had that very morning contrived to elude the guard, and, rushing on deck, had thrown herself overboard and never been seen again!

Poor Jack was so utterly overwhelmed at this awful confirmation of his worst forebodings that several minutes elapsed ere he could speak, and even then he could find no words wherewith to soothe the despair of his friends: but presently he managed to tell them again that he was there to restore them to liberty, and that there were plenty of friends who would stand by them upon their return to their home; then he asked them whether they knew of any more prisoners on board who, like themselves, were the victims of Spanish injustice and tyranny, suggesting that, if so, those poor wretches should also be restored to freedom; whereupon Don Hermoso mentioned that he believed there were two or three more political prisoners on board, and, at Jack’s request, accompanied him forward and pointed them out. These also Jack ordered aft, and when they came abreast of the gangway he directed them down into the boat, whither Don Hermoso and his bereaved family followed them, Jack going last, and informing the skipper of the *Marañon* ere he left that he might now proceed on his voyage, which that individual forthwith did;

while, as soon as the released prisoners were on board the yacht, and the boat hoisted to the davits, that craft continued her course to the westward—until the convict steamer was out of sight, when the bows of the *Thetis* were again turned eastward and her speed reduced to dead slow, for she now had to be stripped of her disguise and restored to her normal appearance again, and some convenient spot for the performance of this operation had to be found, Milsom not deeming it wise to return and effect it in the spot from which they had so recently come. This spot was eventually found, in the shape of a tiny cove near Point Lucrecia; and into it they steamed at daylight next morning, leaving it again the same evening, an hour before sunset, when the *Thetis* again showed as the trim, white-hulled English yacht, with all her boats bright varnished as of yore, neither yacht nor boats bearing the slightest trace of ever having been even remotely connected with the mysterious “gunboat” that had been seen by the fishermen to steam out of Sagua la Grande harbour.

When at length, by the exercise of illimitable patience, Jack succeeded in persuading his friends to believe that their troubles were over, and had induced them to settle down in peace and comfort aboard the yacht, and also to ease their aching hearts by telling him what they had undergone since that day when they so blithely parted from him at the railway station at Havana, it was a really heartrending story of cruel oppression and shameful, irresponsible tyranny to which he felt himself obliged to listen. There is no need to give the full details here; it is sufficient to simply state that upon their arrival at Bejucal, the first station beyond Santiago, they were accosted by a sergeant, who ordered them to leave the train, and who, with the assistance of a couple of files of soldiers, conveyed them back to Havana by goods train late that same night, marching them all off to La Jacoba prison about three o'clock the next morning, where each of them was confined in a separate cell. Later in the day—that is to say, about eleven o'clock in the morning—Don Hermoso was visited by a file of soldiers, who informed him that the governor demanded his presence, and roughly commanded him to follow them. Having obeyed this command, the Don presently found himself in a kind of office, and confronted with Alvaros, who ordered the two guards to leave him alone with their prisoner. Then, this having been done, Alvaros informed Don Hermoso that, in consequence of certain information supplied to the Government, his house had been searched during his absence, and sufficient treasonable correspondence found therein to send the entire family to the penal settlements for life. Next he reminded Don Hermoso that he had on a certain occasion paid him and his family the compliment of proposing for the hand of Doña Isolda, and that the Don had seen fit to reject the proposal with scorn and contumely; yet such, he said, was his generous and forgiving nature that he was quite willing not only to overlook that affront, but also to secure the pardon of Don Hermoso and his family for their treason to the Spanish Government, if the said Don Hermoso would now withdraw his refusal and give his consent to his daughter's marriage with him, Don Sebastian Alvaros, a scion of one of the most noble families in Old Spain. Don Hermoso's reply to this suggestion was the repetition of a categorical and uncompromising refusal; whereupon Alvaros fell into a paroxysm of rage and swore that he would either compel Don Hermoso to give his consent, or certain very dreadful things would happen to every member of the family, Doña Isolda included. And certain very dreadful things had happened, among which floggings and starvation might be mentioned, the whole culminating in their condemnation to transportation for life to the horrors of the penal settlement of Fernando Po, when Don Hermoso persisted in his refusal and declared that he would rather see his daughter dead than wedded to such a scoundrel as Don Sebastian Alvaros. These were the bare outlines of the story, as told by Don Hermoso, but there were details of words said and deeds done that caused Jack Singleton to “see red”, and to wonder how it was that a man, made in God's image, could ever become degraded to a condition so much lower than that of the beasts that perish; and how it was that such fiends in human form were permitted to live and to work their wicked will upon others. “However,” he comforted himself by saying, “such atrocities as Señor Alvaros has committed do not go unpunished, and the time will come when he will wish that he had shot himself rather than yield to the suggestions of his own evil heart!” How truly he prophesied, and how awful was the retribution that was to fall upon Don Sebastian Alvaros, Jack little knew, otherwise it is possible that even his righteous anger might have been mitigated, his craving for vengeance drowned in the fountain of pity!

Chapter Fifteen.

Retribution.

It was a trifle over thirty-six hours from the moment of the deliverance of Don Hermoso and his wife and son when the *Thetis*, brilliant in all the bravery of white enamel paint, gilt figurehead and ornamental scroll-work, freshly varnished boats, and scintillating brasswork, steamed into Guantanamo harbour and let go her anchor off the little town—or village, for it is scarcely more—of Caimamera. The visit of the yacht to this out-of-the-way spot was ostensibly for the purpose of enabling that erratic and irresponsible young Englishman, her owner, to enjoy a day or two's fishing, Guantanamo harbour being noted for the variety of fish with which its waters teem, and the excellent sport which they afford; but Jack's first act was to go ashore and pay an early visit to the telegraph office, from which he dispatched a cipher wire to Don Ramon Bergera, briefly acquainting that gentleman with the bare facts of the rescue and Doña Isolda's death. Then he allowed the crew to take a couple of boats and go fishing, while he devoted himself to the arduous task of comforting and consoling his friends as best he could; indeed, that had been his chief occupation from the moment when the Montijos had first come on board the yacht from the convict ship. Nor were his efforts altogether unavailing, although it was exceedingly difficult to find words of comfort for those whose hearts were still bleeding from the tragic loss of the being who was dearest to them all. With the Señora Montijo Jack was much more successful than with her husband and son, for the poor soul's reason was entirely gone, and to such an extent, indeed, that she seemed to have completely forgotten every circumstance connected with their recent misfortunes, appearing to merely remember Jack as someone with whom certain pleasant memories, vaguely recalled, were connected, and in whose society she therefore took pleasure. She very rarely spoke, never rationally, but was content to walk fore and aft the deck by the hour, with her hand on Jack's supporting arm and her eyes gazing dreamily at the deck planks. She took even more pleasure in Jack's society than she did in that of her husband and son, both of whom were at this time gloomy, saturnine, silent brooders upon revenge.

On the second day after their arrival in Guantanamo harbour there came a letter from Don Ramon, briefly congratulating Jack upon his success and the Montijos upon their deliverance, and requesting them to remain where

they were for the present, as he had been unable to gather any definite news, but was busily conducting a number of enquiries. Then, after the lapse of a full week, there came another letter from the same source, informing them that the writer had received a communication from Señor Calderon, Don Hermoso's manager, stating that Señor Alvaros—now promoted to the rank of major—had appeared at the hacienda with the intelligence that Don Hermoso and his family, having been found guilty of the crime of conspiracy against the Spanish Government, had been shipped off to Fernando Po for life; and the estates, having been sequestrated, had been given to him as a reward for meritorious service: furthermore, that, Señor Calderon having had long experience in the management of the estate, Major Alvaros was disposed to allow him to retain the post of manager, at least for the present, upon condition that he was found to serve his new master faithfully: and that, finally, Señor Calderon was henceforward to account to Major Alvaros for all income and expenditure connected with the estate. Don Ramon then went on to state that, upon receipt of this communication, he had taken it upon himself to pay a flying visit to Señor Calderon, upon which occasion he, Don Ramon, had informed the Señor of the escape of Don Hermoso from the convict ship, and had instructed him to hold the property, at all hazards, until Don Hermoso's return. And the letter wound up by strongly urging Don Hermoso to return to his property forthwith and hold it against all comers, arming his peons and dependents, if necessary; although the writer was of opinion that the Government generally, and Alvaros in particular, would soon be much too busy to find time to dispute Don Hermoso's right to the possession of his property.

Thereupon a council of war was held on the yacht's quarter-deck—the members consisting of Don Hermoso, Carlos, Jack, and Milsom—at which it was ultimately decided that the *Thetis* should weigh anchor forthwith and run over to Calonna, there to land Don Hermoso, the Señora, Carlos, and Jack, who would then proceed to the hacienda with all speed; while the yacht, under Milsom's command, was to proceed to the Laguna de Cortes, and there remain concealed until it should be seen in what way she could best be employed, after which Milsom was to return by boat to Calonna, and from thence make his way to the hacienda, in order that he might be on the spot to receive such verbal instructions as might be necessary. This arrangement was duly carried out, and the evening of the following day witnessed the return of the little party to the home which they had so joyously left some months before, little dreaming of the sad circumstances under which they would next gaze upon the familiar surroundings.

They were welcomed back by the *employés* of the estate with every sign of the utmost satisfaction, tempered with deep and sincere sorrow at the tragic fate of the young and beautiful daughter of the house, who had contrived during her short life to render herself idolised by every individual in her father's service, from Señor Calderon downward. In the presence of the master and mistress the negroes, with that innate sense of delicacy which governs their conduct toward those whom they love, were careful that the signs of their grief at the loss of their beloved young mistress should be confined to a few respectful expressions of sympathy; but when Mamá Faquita, Señorita Isolda's old nurse, having extracted from Carlos a tolerably full and detailed account of the circumstances that had culminated in her beloved young mistress's death, went the round of the negro huts that night, she kindled in the breasts of her fellows a flame of fury and vengeful longing that was destined to consume Señor Alvaros.

It is not to be wondered at that, after what Don Hermoso had suffered, personally and through his family, from Spanish misrule, his interest in the management of his vast estates should occupy only a secondary position in his mind; and that he should relegate that management almost entirely to the capable hands and conscientious mind of Señor Calderon, giving the first and most important place to the advancement, by every means in his power, of the aims of the revolutionaries. With this object, therefore, he shut himself up in his own private room for the three weeks following his return home, and plunged strenuously into a voluminous correspondence with Marti, Jesus Rabi, Antonio Maceo, Maximo Gomez, and other more or less prominent insurgent leaders, making exhaustive enquiry into the condition and prospects of the party, and offering advice and assistance in its several projects: while Jack and Carlos made long excursions in various directions for the purpose of personally ascertaining the feeling of the inhabitants and adding fuel to the smouldering flame of insurrection by every means in their power; for it may be said at once that the shocking tyranny, the cruel injustice, and the callous indifference on the part of the island authorities which had rendered possible such a disaster as that which had befallen his friends had kindled in Jack Singleton's breast such fiery indignation, and such a loathing abhorrence, that—quixotic as the resolve may seem to some—he had at once determined to throw in his lot with that of the Montijos, and assist by every means in his power to free Cuba from Spanish misrule.

In this fashion nearly two months went by, during which, by Don Hermoso's instructions, the armament of the *Thetis* had been dismantled, remounted upon field carriages constructed by the carpenter and engineers of the vessel, landed, with their ammunition, at various points on the coast, and delivered over to the armed bands of the revolutionaries, who were by this time springing up like mushrooms all over the island; and the yacht, under Milsom's command, had been dispatched to New York for further supplies. And during the whole of this time, thanks to the fact that the secret had been kept from everybody but sympathisers whose discretion might be relied on, the rescue and return of the Montijo family remained unsuspected by the Spanish authorities.

Then, one morning, a message reached Señor Calderon from Major Alvaros, to the effect that the latter would arrive at the hacienda that night, on a business visit, and that all necessary preparations were to be made for his reception. This message Calderon at once handed to Don Hermoso, with a request for instructions as to how the matter should be dealt with; whereupon Jack and Carlos, who happened to be at hand that day, at once undertook the duty of receiving the Spaniard suitably.

It was nearly five o'clock in the evening when Alvaros, hot, tired, and dusty from his long ride from Pinar del Rio and his previous journey by train, drew rein and dismounted before the broad flight of steps leading up to the gallery which ran round the house, and, handing over his horse to an obsequious negro who was in waiting, proceeded to ascend the steps, his brow wrinkled into a frown of displeasure at Calderon's failure to be present to give him a suitably respectful greeting upon his arrival. He reached the top of the steps, paused for a moment to glance around him at the wide prospect visible from the commanding elevation of the gallery, and then strode forward to enter the house, the wide folding doors of which stood, as usual, invitingly open. But as he did so, and ere his foot reached the threshold, he was confronted by Carlos, who, emerging suddenly from the obscurity of the entrance hall, levelled a

revolver straight at the Spaniard's right eye, so that before that individual could recover from his astonishment, he found himself gazing into the grooved barrel.

"Hands up, you villain and murderer!" exclaimed the young Cuban, glaring savagely along the sights of the levelled weapon into Señor Alvaros' eye: "hands up; or I will blow your worthless brains out with as little compunction as that with which I would crush a venomous snake beneath my heel! Quick! Don't hesitate, or I fire!"

Alvaros did not hesitate; there was that in the expression of Carlos' eye, and in the yearning curl of his finger round the trigger, which told the Spaniard that the least sign of hesitation would be fatal; and, with the fear of death upon him, he instantly halted and flung up his hands. Had he only known to what that was the prelude he would probably have kept them down and marched on to his death!

Then, from behind Carlos, Jack appeared, with a whistle in his hand, which he raised to his lips, and upon which he blew a shrill blast. At the sound a number of negroes appeared, one of them bearing a long coil of raw-hide rope, with a noose at one end of it, in his hand. This rope Jack took from the hands of the negro and, dropping the noose over Alvaros' head, drew it fairly tight, and then handed the rest of the rope back to the black.

"Señor," exclaimed the quaking Spaniard, with quivering lips, "are you about to murder me?"

"Not just yet," answered Jack cheerfully. "What we may eventually do I will not pretend to say, because, you see, such vermin as you are not fit to live; but at present we are only going to give you the second instalment—I gave you the first, you will remember"—pointing to the officer's still stiff elbow—"of the punishment due to you for your infamous treatment of Don Hermoso and his family."

The fellow was by this time white as a corpse, and his lips were tremulous with terror, yet he strove to carry things off with a high hand.

"I presume, Señor," he said, "that it is due to your instrumentality that that young ruffian is here at this moment, instead of on his way to Fernando Po; and as he is here, I take it for granted that the remaining members of the family are not far off. But rest assured that a terrible retribution awaits you, not only for this outrage upon me, but also for your rescue of prisoners sentenced by the Spanish Government to transportation!"

"Yes," said Jack; "no doubt; I am quite willing to take your word for that. But," altering his tone from one of banter to that of concentrated anger, "let me tell you, Señor Alvaros, that Señorita Isolda Montijo is dead—owing to your cruelty—and for that and your other crimes retribution is about to fall on you. And this is the first part of it!"

Saying which, he unbuckled Alvaros' sword, drew the weapon from its sheath, and snapped the blade across his knee.

"There!" he exclaimed, flinging the pieces from him; "you will never again disgrace that weapon



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by wearing it. Lead him away, Pedro; and if he attempts any nonsense, just choke him with that lariat."

"This way, Señor," exclaimed Pedro, roughly jerking the lariat in the direction of the steps, as a hint to the prisoner that he was to descend them; and in this ignominious fashion the once arrogant but now cowering and cringing Spaniard was led away under Jack's supervision, while Carlos, selecting a heavy riding-whip from the rack, followed the procession. The prisoner was conducted to the negro quarters, which were situated about half a mile from the house, with a belt of timber between it and them; and there he was stripped to his trousers, and firmly lashed to a post which had been hastily erected for the purpose. Then, the whole of the negroes employed upon the plantation

having been assembled, Carlos related to the blacks the several sufferings and indignities which Alvaros had caused to be inflicted upon the members of the Montijo family, and how to him was due the death of the Señorita, his sister, whom they had all loved so well: and when he had finished his story he flogged Alvaros until the miserable wretch screamed and howled for mercy, offering the most abject excuses and apologies for his conduct, and vowing by all the saints that if Carlos would but release him he would leave Cuba, never to return; that he would surrender the Montijo estates to their rightful owner; that he would never breathe to a single living soul a syllable as to what had passed; and that he would also do a number of other unlikely, not to say impossible, things. Then, when his arm was tired, and he could flog no longer, Carlos desisted, and ordered Alvaros to be cast loose from the stake and securely confined in an empty tobacco shed, with a negro on guard at the door of the building to see that he did not escape. When at length the shrinking, cringing creature was hustled into his prison and securely bound, Carlos turned to him and said:

“You have now received the second instalment of punishment for your atrocious crime. You will be kept here until it is convenient to remove you, being fed meanwhile upon bread and water. And when a convenient time arrives you will be placed on board a ship and marooned, which will be the final instalment of the punishment which your evil deeds have called down upon your head. The best thing I can wish you is that what you have suffered to-day, and will suffer in the future, will bring home to you the evil of your ways, and lead to your sincere repentance for them.” And therewith he passed from Señor Alvaros’ sight—to be seen by him no more.

That same night, when the white people had all retired to rest in the great casa, Mamá Faquita stole away down to the negro quarters and, going from hut to hut, roused their occupants and summoned them to a great palaver in the open space which the huts surrounded, and in which the children were wont to play. The scene was a weirdly picturesque one, for, prior to rousing the negroes, Mamá had kindled a great fire in the centre of the open space; and in front of this, in a great semicircle, the negroes congregated, squatting on their heels and rolling their eyeballs in the flickering light of the flames, while Mamá addressed them. They were all free, but had all been slaves not so very many years before: many of them were born Africans, with their savage instincts still practically as strong within them as they had ever been; while in the case of the rest, although their association with white men from their birth had rendered them more amenable in some respects than were the more recent importations, the tenacity with which they had adhered to their fetish-worship, with all its secret and horribly revolting customs, tended to keep them still utterly savage at heart, and only too ready to lend a willing ear to any suggestion which offered them an excuse to indulge their inherent lust for cruelty. Moreover, the African black who has been a slave is a singular combination of good and evil: on the one hand, he is capable of affection and devotion, to an extraordinary degree, toward those who have treated him well; while, on the other, he is equally capable of the most ferocious and implacable hatred of those who have injured him or those he loves; also, he is extraordinarily impressionable. Mamá Faquita, being herself a full-blooded negress, was of course perfectly well aware of these peculiarities in the nature of her audience; and she played upon them as a skilled musician does upon a sensitively responsive instrument. She dwelt eloquently and at length upon the invariable kindness with which they had one and all been treated by the *amo* and his family, and especially by the young Señorita, whom some of them at least were able to remember as a little, toddling baby, and whom they all had loved as passionately as though she had been their own; and as she spoke thus the tears of grief streamed down her cheeks, and she wrung her hands in anguish evoking a ready and sympathetic response from her hearers. Then she went on to recall to their memory the sad homecoming of two months ago, and the dreadful tale that they had been told when they asked why the Señorita had not also returned: and finally she reminded them—as though any reminder were by this time necessary—that the author of the family’s woe now lay, ay, at that very moment, imprisoned in the tobacco shed, within a stone’s-throw of the spot where they were then assembled. She spoke with qualified satisfaction of the punishment which the young master had inflicted upon the picaro in their presence a few hours ago; she admitted that, so far as it went, it was good: but she contended that it did not go nearly far enough, considering the monstrous character of the crime of which the prisoner had been guilty; and she asserted her conviction that white men did not know how to punish, that they were altogether too squeamish in their notions, particularly in the matter of dealing mercifully with those who had injured them; and that it was only the negro who thoroughly understood how to devise a punishment to properly fit the crime.

It was enough; there was no need for her to say another word. With consummate skill she had gradually wrought her audience up to a pitch of demoniac fury; she had pictured her—and their—beloved young mistress in the power of the wretch who crouched with smarting, lacerated back yonder in the shed—insulted, ill-treated, and finally driven to madness and death by him: and now, at a word from one of them, the whole body of negroes sprang to their feet and, with low, hissing, muttering execrations and threats, infinitely more terrifying to listen to than the loudest yells of ferocity, ran to the shed and, with a few low-murmured words of explanation to the guard, demanded the surrender of the prisoner. The demand was conceded with scarcely a word of protest, and five minutes later the miserable Alvaros, in a speechless frenzy of fear, was being hurried along a lonely bush path, known only to the negroes, to a spot some three miles distant. What happened to him when he arrived there must be left untold; suffice it to say that Major Alvaros was never more seen of men, and the mystery of his disappearance remains unsolved to this day, although Carlos Montijo and Jack Singleton are under the delusion that they know what became of him. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the hacienda were never troubled by inconvenient enquiries about him, for it afterwards transpired that when he set out upon his fateful journey he had not thought fit to say whither he was going, or how long he intended to be absent; by the time, therefore, that his prolonged absence from duty had provoked enquiry, all trace of him was completely lost.

The male occupants of the house were just finishing early breakfast next morning when Señor Calderon presented himself before them, in a condition of considerable mental discomposure, with the intelligence that the prisoner had apparently contrived to effect his escape; for one of the negroes had just come up to the house with the report that, upon his opening the door of the tobacco shed to give the captive his breakfast, Alvaros was found to have disappeared, and no trace of him had thus far been discovered. This was distinctly alarming news, for it was instantly recognised that if Alvaros had really contrived to get clear away, he would undoubtedly make the best of his way back to Havana and there report to the authorities the violence to which he had been subjected; and also, possibly,

the rescue of the Montijos from the convict ship, though mention of the latter would probably depend upon whether their conviction had been the result of representations to the Capitan-General, or whether, as Don Ramon Bergera had surmised, it had been the work of Alvaros alone. In either case, the consequences were likely to be quite serious to the Montijos; and Carlos, accompanied by Jack and Calderon, at once hurried away to investigate the circumstances of the alleged escape.

Upon their arrival at the tobacco shed they found the door of the building still locked and the negro guard still posted before it, the door having been re-fastened, as Calderon explained, immediately upon the discovery of the prisoner's disappearance. Entering the shed, they at once satisfied themselves as to the truth of the statement that its late occupant was no longer in it, for the building was absolutely empty, and, being a perfectly plain structure, with simply four stone walls, a cement floor, and an unceiled roof, there was no nook or cranny in which even a rat, much less a man, could conceal himself. Moreover, the rope by which he had been, as it was thought, securely bound before being left on the previous evening, was lying upon the floor, immediately beneath one of the large, shuttered openings in the walls which were used for the admission of light and air into the shed as required. The position of the rope naturally led to an examination of the opening beneath which it lay; and it was then found that the massive bolts securing the shutter had been drawn, and that therefore there was nothing to prevent the prisoner from escaping through the opening—provided that he could free himself from the rope and reach it. But how he had contrived to accomplish these two things was the mystery: for Carlos and Jack had both been present during the lashing-up of Alvaros, and they both felt that they would have been fully prepared to declare that for the prisoner to release himself would be a simple impossibility, so securely had he been bound; while the sill of the opening was quite nine feet from the floor, and for a man to reach it without the help of a ladder, or some similar aid, seemed equally impossible,—and there was no such aid in the building. It occurred to Jack that the prisoner, after freeing himself from his bonds, might have succeeded in throwing the loop of the rope over one of the shutter bolts, and so have drawn himself up; but to accomplish such a feat in absolute darkness again seemed an absolute impossibility. Altogether, the circumstances seemed to be enveloped in impenetrable mystery; there was only one indisputable fact, which was that the prisoner was gone. Then the negro guard was severely questioned, but he seemed quite unable to throw any light upon the matter; his statement was that he had exercised the utmost vigilance all through the night, that he had heard no sound of movement on the part of the prisoner, had noticed nothing to suggest an attempt at escape, and was utterly confounded when, upon unlocking the door to take in the prisoner's breakfast, he found that the bird had flown. This was his story, and no amount of cross-examination caused him to deviate in the slightest degree from it; for when a negro lays himself out to deceive, the fact that he is lying through thick and thin causes him no qualms of conscience.

The investigation thus conclusively pointed to the fact that the prisoner had somehow contrived to escape; and, that having been established, the obviously proper thing to do was to endeavour to recapture him. Horses were therefore ordered to be saddled and taken up to the house; a Fantee negro, who had been re-named Juan, and who had the reputation of being a marvellously expert tracker, was ordered to examine the ground about the tobacco shed for tracks, and to hold himself ready to accompany the hunters; and Jack and Carlos then returned to the house to equip themselves. In something less than half an hour the party, consisting of Jack and Carlos, mounted, and each armed with a rifle, and half a dozen negroes, including Juan, set out.

The hunt began at the tobacco shed, beneath the unbolted shutter of which Juan declared that, despite the hardness of the ground, he had succeeded in detecting the footprints of the fugitive; and thence it took its course northward, strange to say, in the direction of the mountains, instead of toward Pinar del Rio, as the two young white men had naturally expected. This was so surprising that, as soon as the direction became apparent, Carlos called a halt and openly expressed his conviction that the Fantee was making a mistake; but Juan confidently declared that he was doing nothing of the sort, and, in support of his statement, pointed to certain barely perceptible marks here and there on the ground, which he asserted were the tracks of the fugitive—this assertion being corroborated by the other negroes. To the eyes of the white men the marks in question were so very slight and vague as to convey absolutely no meaning at all; indeed, they could not in some cases convince themselves that there really were any marks; but then the ground was so dry and hard that even their horses left scarcely a trace of their passage: they were therefore obliged to take Juan's word for it that they were on the right track, and follow where he led.

They were of opinion that, considering Alvaros' condition after the terrific punishment which Carlos had inflicted upon him only a few hours previously, and the circumstance that he seemed to have been travelling for several hours in darkness, over country that must have been absolutely strange to him, he could not have made very rapid progress, or gone very far; and after the first hour they were in momentary expectation of coming upon him: but mile after mile was traversed, and still Juan asserted that the fugitive was yet some distance ahead, and that they did not appear to be gaining on him very rapidly—due, as the negro pointed out, to the extreme difficulty of tracking over such hard and, for the most part stony, ground. The fact was that Juan and his fellow-negroes, having arranged among themselves a course of action during the short period while Carlos and Jack were preparing for the expedition, were enacting a very cleverly carried out piece of comedy, so cleverly performed, indeed, that neither of the young men had the slightest suspicion that they were being deceived.

At length the track, which had led them steadily over rising ground almost from the moment of starting, conducted the party to the entrance of a very wild, romantic, and picturesque-looking gorge which seemed to pierce right into the very heart of the mountains. For some time the going had been growing increasingly difficult, especially for the two horsemen; and now a single glance ahead sufficed to show that it must speedily become impossible for mounted men, for the side of the mountain grew increasingly steep, as one looked forward, until, about a quarter of a mile farther on, it seemed to be practically perpendicular, while the pine trees grew so thickly that in places it appeared as though there would be scarcely room for a man, much less a horse, to pass; moreover, the side of the hill was covered with big outcrops of rock, interspersed with loose boulders, to pass over and among which would require a clear head, a steady eye, and a sure foot. The two young men therefore determined to dismount forthwith and proceed on foot, leaving their horses in charge of one of the negroes.

And it was well that they did so, for the path almost immediately grew so steep and difficult that before they had

advanced another hundred yards the party found it necessary to frequently drop on their hands and knees to pass some of the more awkward places without being precipitated into the stream which they heard brawling some hundreds of feet below them at the bottom of the ravine. And now, as they slowly and with difficulty made their way along the steep mountain-side, a low murmur, gradually growing in strength and volume of sound, told them that they were approaching a waterfall or cataract of some sort: and after another half-hour of exhausting and perilous crawling, and slipping, and sliding over the loose and shaley ground, they came in sight of it as it opened out before them from behind an enormous, precipitous crag—a solid column of water about twenty feet in diameter, leaping out of a narrow cleft in the rock some three hundred feet above them, and gradually resolving itself into mist as it plunged down into the dark and gloomy depths of the gorge below. To Carlos—and still more to Jack—it seemed impossible that the fugitive should have chosen to pursue the track which they were now following—for to where did it lead? The place was quite new to Carlos; he had never been there before, and it seemed unlikely in the extreme that a stranger to the neighbourhood as Alvaros was would know more about it than one who had dwelt only a few miles off during practically his whole life: yet Juan was now pressing on, a long way ahead, as though he were following on a hot scent, and presently he disappeared altogether in a thick cluster of fir trees high up the side of the hill. Ten minutes later he emerged on the other side of the clump and went scrambling toward the spot where the stream of water spouted out of the rock. Then Carlos saw him suddenly stop and look steadily down the almost vertical side of the mountain, then at the ground at his feet. It took the two lads nearly a quarter of an hour to reach the spot where Juan stood, now surrounded by the other four negroes, to whom he was talking animatedly; and, as they approached, the Fantee pointed to some scars on the hillside which looked as though they had been quite recently made by the passage of some heavy body.

“Look, Señores,” he cried; “that is where the Spaniard has gone! A loose boulder caught him just here and swept him down into the gorge below. We shall never see him again!”

Carlos and Jack looked. Yes; the marks were precisely such as a falling boulder would make, and they were apparently quite fresh, possibly less than half an hour old. But how did Juan know that Alvaros had gone down the hillside with the boulder? Jack asked the question.

“Because,” answered the black triumphantly, “he came as far as this—as we have seen by his footprints—but went no farther; there are no more footprints to be found. And see, the boulder struck the ground just here”—pointing to a big, raw dint in the soil—“and bounded off, striking again down there where you see that mark. It must have struck here just as the Spaniard reached the spot, and hurled him down to the bottom of the gorge before it. He is doubtless down there at the bottom of the stream, at this moment, pinned down by the boulder that killed him!” And the other negroes emphatically corroborated the statements and suggestions.

To Jack and Carlos the theory enunciated by Juan appeared quite possible. Of course they had to accept Juan’s word for it that the fugitive’s footsteps had been followed thus far, and had utterly disappeared at the precise spot where the boulder—or whatever it was—had struck. But, this much granted, the remainder of the story seemed quite plausible, seemed indeed the only possible explanation; and since it was quite impossible to test its truth or falsehood without descending to the river below—which was also an impossibility—they were disposed to accept it as true.

And thus, very materially assisted by the fortuitous fall of a boulder down a hillside, did the negroes on Señor Montijo’s estate successfully hoodwink their white masters, and effectually and for ever put a stop to any further enquiries as to what had become of Major Alvaros, of His Spanish Majesty’s light infantry, and erstwhile Governor of La Jacoba.

Chapter Sixteen.

The War-cloud overshadows the Hacienda Montijo.

For the first fortnight or three weeks following the evanishment of Señor Alvaros a considerable degree of uneasiness prevailed at the hacienda Montijo, the inmates of which daily looked for the appearance of some emissary of the Spanish Government, charged with the duty of investigating the circumstances connected with the disappearance of an important Spanish official: and it was recognised that not only would the enquiries of such an individual be difficult to reply to, but also that his presence would incidentally result in the discovery that the members of the Montijo family, instead of being at Fernando Po, were—with one exception—at home again. It was admitted to be a contingency that needed careful yet firm handling, and after much consideration a plan was evolved by Jack and Carlos which it was believed would deal effectively with the difficulty, and the necessary steps were taken. But as day after day passed without bringing upon them the complication which they apprehended, their uneasiness rapidly lessened, until at length a day arrived when the conviction forced itself upon them that the attention of the Spanish Government was so fully occupied with other and much more important matters that the disappearance of Señor Alvaros seemed likely to be permitted to pass without especial notice. And thereupon Jack undertook to pay a visit to Don Ramon Bergera in Havana, with the object of ascertaining, as far as possible, what was the attitude of the Spanish official mind upon the subject. He accordingly set out for Pinar del Rio one morning after early breakfast, and arrived in Havana the same afternoon, intending to return to the hacienda Montijo on the following day. But he remained in Havana a full fortnight, during which he and Don Ramon learned many things—among them, the facts that Señor Alvaros was solely responsible for the arrest and attempted transportation of the Montijos, and also for the seizure of the estate—neither of which acts had been reported to the Capitan-General, or been officially recorded: and that, doubtless because of these important reasons, when he had set out on his last journey to visit the estate which he had thus secretly seized, he had omitted to mention to anyone his intentions, his destination, or the probable duration of his absence, with the result that eventually, when the accumulated arrears of his work at length attracted attention and provoked enquiry, nobody could throw the least light upon his whereabouts. The conviction had therefore at length been arrived at that—the man being well-known as possessing a singularly arrogant,

overbearing, and irascible disposition—he had perished in some obscure and, quite possibly, discreditable quarrel; and his post as Governor of La Jacoba Prison had been given to another man. These particulars had been gleaned by dint of very patient and careful enquiry on the part of Don Ramon, so judiciously conducted that not a particle of suspicion had anywhere been raised that any enquiry at all was being made: and with them Jack returned to the hacienda and restored tranquillity to the minds of its inhabitants, for it had now been made clear not only that they might dismiss all apprehension of embarrassing enquiry concerning the fate of Señor Alvaros, but also that nobody was likely to dispute Don Hermoso's right to retain his own property.

But no sooner were their minds relieved upon this point than they were filled with apprehension on another, namely, poor Señora Montijo's mental condition, which seemed to steadily grow worse. For the first few months of the unfortunate lady's affliction she had been very quiet, giving no trouble at all, and appearing to suffer chiefly from complete loss of memory. But now, just at the moment when Jack and Carlos were completing their preparations to take the field with the rebel forces, a change for the worse occurred: her memory returned to her intermittently, bringing with it the recollection of her daughter's fate, and then, by some peculiar mental process, nothing would console the unhappy mother but the presence and companionship of her son and Jack; and if the lads happened to be both absent when these paroxysms of revived memory occurred, the poor lady quickly became plunged into a condition of such abysmal despair and such maniacal violence that she was for the time being a menace to herself and everybody else. Nobody but Carlos or Jack seemed to have the power of soothing her, and sometimes the combined efforts of both were needed: thus it came about that many months passed, during which the two youths felt themselves constrained to remain within call, and to devote themselves to the task of alleviating the misery of the unhappy lady.

Meanwhile, the rebellion, which had arisen in the first instance in the province of Santiago, was for some time confined to the eastern end of the island. At the moment of its outbreak Spain had a garrison of some seventeen thousand men in Cuba, which was an amply sufficient force to have stamped out the rising, had the authorities dealt with it energetically. But they either could not, or would not, see, until it was too late, that serious trouble was impending; and when at length this fact was recognised, and the garrison raised to some thirty thousand men, the rebellion had made such headway that the rebels already had a force of four thousand men in the field, with Maximo Gomez as its Commander-in-chief, and Antonio Maceo as second in command. At this time, however, very few whites had actually taken up arms in the revolutionary cause, for Gomez was a native of San Domingo, while Maceo was a mulatto, and the whites in Cuba entertained the same objection to serving under coloured men that is to be found practically all the world over. But this was more than compensated for by the great accession of coloured recruits attracted to the insurgent ranks by the appearance of Maceo in a position of authority. At the same time secret committees were formed in every town in Cuba for the purpose of preaching the gospel of revolt, with the result that the whole province of Santiago and the greater part of Puerto Principe quickly became aflame.

General Martinez Campos, the Capitan-General of the island, at length began to realise the increasing gravity of the situation, and sent to his home government a report to the effect that, in consequence of the rapid spread of the rebellion, it would be absolutely necessary to occupy every province of the island in force, and to vigorously attack the insurgents wherever met with in the field; and that, to do this effectively, he must have still more troops. Accordingly, more troops were dispatched, with the result that by the end of the year 1895 the Spanish arms in Cuba totalled no less than one hundred thousand men, while the rebel strength had increased to ten thousand, who, however, were very badly in need of arms, ammunition, and stores. Consequently Milsom, in the *Thetis*, was kept busy at this time picking up supplies wherever he could get them, and then smuggling them into the island with a boldness and ingenuity that completely baffled all the efforts of the Spaniards to detect him.

The proportion of Spanish troops to the revolutionary forces was at this time, it will be observed, as ten to one. This, on paper, appears to be enormous, yet it was not so in reality: for, whereas the Cubans were all native to the soil and inured to the climate, and were, moreover, familiar with the topography of the country, the Spanish soldiers were mostly young, raw recruits, poor shots, quite new to service in the Tropics, unacclimatised, of poor stamina, and therefore peculiarly liable to fall victims to the fever and dysentery which follow upon exposure to tropical rain. Moreover, they were badly fed, and worse looked after; the great disparity between the strength of the two forces was consequently much more apparent than real. Then, too, the Spanish officers were mostly of very indifferent quality: they suffered from the same climatic disabilities as their men; the heat enervated them to such an extent that they could not be induced to take the least trouble about anything, or undertake the least labour; they made no attempt to improve the quality of their men's shooting; they were lax in the enforcement of discipline—save, perhaps, in the exaction of a proper measure of respect from their subordinates; they were strangers to the island and quite ignorant of its topography, and they were too indolent to attempt to learn anything of it; and, lastly, the maps with which they had been supplied were even worse than useless, for they were absolutely misleading. Thus the insurgents experienced no difficulty in eluding the pursuit of the Spanish forces, and in luring them, time after time, into carefully prepared traps, from which escape was only possible at the cost of heavy loss.

The insurgents were careful that news of their oft-repeated successes against the Spanish troops should be published throughout the island, despite the desperate efforts of the authorities to suppress it; and, as a consequence, new recruits were constantly being added to their ranks. The insurrectionary movement grew apace; and at length a provisional Government was formed, with the Marquez de Cisneros at its head, as President of the Cuban Republic. The first act of the new Government was to divide up the entire island into different districts; and over each district was appointed a civilian as Prefect. It was of course only natural that the Prefecture of the Pinar del Rio district should be offered to Don Hermoso Montijo; but when he was made fully acquainted with the views of the provisional Government he declined it, for he considered that these views on certain points were so extreme as to render the Government unpopular, and to bring absolute ruin upon a very important section of the community, the planters to wit. One of the proposals of the new Government was to impose certain taxes for the purpose of raising funds wherewith to carry on the revolutionary movement, and to this there could of course be no reasonable objection; but when it was further proposed that non-payment of those taxes should be punished by the destruction of the buildings and crops and the seizure of the live stock of defaulters, Don Hermoso asserted that such action was altogether too

drastic, and savoured too much of tyranny to meet with his approval, and he firmly declined to associate himself in any way with it, electing to continue instead to serve the movement, as heretofore, by lavish contributions of money, and the assistance of the yacht.

The next step of the insurgent leaders was also one of which Don Hermoso very strongly disapproved, and against which he passionately pleaded—in vain, with the result that a certain feeling of estrangement, not very far removed from enmity, arose between him and the leading spirits of the revolution. The latter, it appeared, had conceived the idea that so long as industry was permitted to flourish in the island, so long would Spain be able to find the necessary funds for the maintenance of a large army in Cuba; but that the moment industry ceased, the fountain of revenue must run dry, and the troops must be withdrawn. They therefore determined to march their forces right through the island to Havana, destroying everything before them; and this terrible resolution they carried into effect, with the result that their track became a long line of burnt cane fields and fire-blackened buildings, the owners of which, whether Spaniards or Cubans, foes or sympathisers, were of course absolutely ruined. The Capitan-General, with ten thousand men, vainly strove to check this terrible advance, but the insurgents easily eluded him and forced their way into the western provinces; with the result that the home Government superseded Campos, sending out in his stead General Don Valeriano y Nicolán Weyler, a man of wide military experience, and possessing a sinister and unenviable reputation for energy and relentless severity.

The dispatch of such a man as General Weyler to Cuba was undoubtedly due, in a very great measure, to the fact that the United States of America, keeping a watchful eye upon the struggle going on, as it were, at its very doors, manifested a rapidly increasing disposition to sympathise with the insurgents, fighting gallantly for their liberty against an almost overwhelming force. This exhibition of sympathy, which the Americans took no especial pains to conceal, was highly offensive to Spain, and unquestionably went far toward strengthening her determination to suppress the revolution by force of arms; wherefore she not only dispatched General Weyler to Cuba, but also sent with and after him troops sufficient to raise the Spanish army in the island to the number of two hundred and thirty-five thousand men, including guerrillas and volunteers.

Meanwhile, Antonio Maceo, with a force of nearly four thousand men, had penetrated so far west as the province of New Filipipa, where he established himself in a stronghold among the fastnesses of the Sierras de los Organos, or Organ Mountains, from which he swept down at frequent intervals, first upon one town in the neighbourhood and then upon another, harassing and cutting up the Spanish garrisons in them, and generally making of himself a thorn in the flesh of Weyler. The spot in which he had established himself was distant only some ten miles, as the crow flies, from the hacienda Montijo; and he had no sooner made himself comfortable in his new quarters than he surprised and slightly discomposed the inhabitants of the casa by paying them a flying visit. He had been one of the most determined advocates, and the most ruthless executant, of the Republican Government's policy of destructive suppression of the island's industries, and Don Hermoso's firm opposition to that policy had created something very nearly approaching to bad blood between the two; but now, when it was too late, he probably recognised the disastrous mistake that had been made, for it soon became apparent that the chief, if not the sole, object of his visit was to endeavour to regain Don Hermoso's good opinion. But the attempt was not wholly successful; and he did not repeat his visit. The presence of Maceo and four thousand very imperfectly disciplined guerrilla troops, most of whom were coloured men, not too careful in their discrimination between friend and foe, was a double menace of a very serious character to Don Hermoso: for, on the one hand, they were certain, sooner or later, to attract a large body of Spaniards to the neighbourhood, for the purpose of hunting them down; while, on the other, should the patriots find themselves hard pressed, it was quite on the cards that they might take it into their heads to sweep down upon the estate and destroy it utterly, in order to prevent the possibility of the Spaniards seizing it and operating therefrom against them. These two possibilities were anxiously discussed over the dinner-table of the casa Montijo; and it was finally decided that on the following day steps should be taken to put the estate into a condition of defence against both parties.

Now there were three—and only three—possible ways of approach to the estate, the first being by the main road from Pinar del Rio; the second by the cross-country route which Jack and Carlos had followed when riding into Pinar del Rio on the occasion of their intervention in the *James B. Potter* incident; and the third by the route which Alvaros was supposed to have taken on the occasion of his flight, this being the road from the mountains by which Maceo had travelled. This last was an exceedingly difficult route, so difficult, indeed, that there were several spots at which it could be made absolutely impassable with very little difficulty, the most suitable of all, perhaps, being at the waterfall near which Alvaros was supposed to have met his death. At this spot the road—or, rather, path—crossed the ravine by way of an enormous overhanging rock which jutted out from the hillside immediately over the place where the stream flung itself down into the gorge beneath; and, even so, it needed a man with a steady head and good nerves to traverse it, for it was necessary to get from the overhanging rock across a chasm of nearly twelve feet in width to another large rock on the opposite side. A careful examination of this spot convinced Jack that a few pounds of blasting powder, judiciously placed beneath the overhanging mass of rock, would send it hurtling down into the gorge beneath and thus effectually bar all passage in that direction; and this was immediately done. The carriage road from Pinar del Rio could be almost, as easily defended, for, at a few yards from the main road, the private road giving access to Don Hermoso's estate was carried across a wide stream by means of a single-arched masonry bridge, which bridge could be readily destroyed by means of dynamite; and Jack soon made all the arrangements for its destruction, if necessary, at a moment's notice. As for the cross-country road, it, too, led across a stream, much too deep and swift to be forded, and only passable at the point where Jack, Carlos, and their guide, Carnero, had jumped their horses across it. The country on the far side was open for more than a mile, affording not sufficient cover to shelter a rabbit, much less a man; and Jack was of opinion that a Maxim, mounted in a small earthwork which might be thrown up by a few men in less than an hour, would prove amply sufficient to defend the passage against any force that would be likely to be sent against them. Three days, therefore, after Maceo's visit to the hacienda saw their preparations for defence complete, save in the important matter of the Maxims and their ammunition; and two of these, together with a number of rifles, came to hand some three weeks later, Jack having undertaken to proceed to the Laguna de Cortes and there await the arrival of the *Thetis* with another cargo of contraband of war which she was to land at that spot. The stuff had been purchased with Don Hermoso's money, and

Jack therefore felt justified in appropriating as much of it as he considered might be required. He also commandeered one of half a dozen very handsome twelve-pounder field guns, together with a considerable quantity of ammunition. And when he got back with his spoils he took upon himself the duties of musketry instructor to the negroes on the estate, who were knocked off work an hour earlier every evening for the purpose; and, by dint of the exercise of almost inexhaustible patience, he contrived to make very excellent marksmen of a good percentage of them.

Meanwhile, with the exception above referred to, events, so far as those on the estate were concerned, pursued the even tenor of their way; nothing in the least out of the common happened, and the Señora Montijo's mental condition had by this time so far improved that the society of Carlos and Jack was no longer necessary to her welfare.

But they both remained on the estate, for the war had now come almost to their own door, and their services were as likely to be useful where they were as anywhere else. News came to them at irregular intervals, and there by and by reached them the intelligence that, in order to isolate Maceo and prevent his return to the eastern provinces of the island, General Weyler was constructing a *trocha*, or entrenchment, with blockhouses and wire entanglements all complete, from Mariel on the north coast to Majana on the south—that is to say, across the narrowest part of the island—some sixteen or seventeen miles in length. The next news to hand was that the *trocha* was completed, and manned by twenty thousand men! And the next was that Weyler was marching ten thousand troops through the province, with the object of finding and destroying Maceo and his men—and any other rebels, actual or suspected, whom they might chance to find! Jack and Carlos felt that the time had arrived for them to hold themselves on the qui vive.

They were not kept very long in suspense. A few days later, as they were about to sit down to dinner, a negro peon presented himself, with the report that a large body of Spanish troops, having marched down the road from Pinar del Rio, were at that moment pitching their camp on the plain, some two miles away; and just as the party had finished their meal, and were on the point of rising from the table, the beat of horses' hoofs, approaching the house, was heard, with, a little later, the jingle of accoutrements; and presently footsteps, accompanied by the clink of spurs and the clanking of a scabbard, were heard ascending the steps leading to the veranda. The next moment the major-domo flung open the door and, with the announcement of "Capitan Carera", ushered in a fine, soldierly looking man, attired in a silver-braided crimson jacket and shako, and light-blue riding breeches, tucked into knee-boots adorned with large brass spurs.

The newcomer bowed with easy courtesy as he entered, and then paused, apparently taken somewhat aback as his eye fell on the Señora. He quickly recovered himself, however, and, addressing himself to Don Hermoso, asked if he might have the honour of a few minutes' private speech with the owner of the estate; to which Don Hermoso replied by conducting his visitor to the room in which he was wont to transact his business. The interview was very brief, and when it was ended the soldier bowed himself out and, descending the steps, took his horse from the orderly who had accompanied him: then, mounting, he went clattering away down the private road leading through the tobacco fields to the highway, and thence to the distant camp.

"Well, what is the news, Pater?" demanded Carlos, as Don Hermoso presently returned to the dining-room, looking very pale and agitated.

"The news, my son, is this," answered Don Hermoso, his voice quivering with anger: "General Echaguë, who is in command of the troops which have just encamped in our neighbourhood, has sent a message to me regretfully intimating that it will be his duty to destroy this house, together with all its warehouses and outbuildings of every description, to prevent its seizure by the rebels who are known to be in this neighbourhood. And, as an act of grace, he gives me until noon to-morrow to remove my household and belongings to such a place of safety as I may select!"

"Oh! he does, does he?" retorted Carlos. "Awfully kind of him, I'm sure! And what answer did you return to the message?"

"I simply replied that I thanked General Echaguë for the time given me, and that I would do my utmost to complete my preparations by the hour named," answered Don Hermoso.

"That is all right!" commented Carlos grimly. "I think we can complete our preparations by noon to-morrow. What say you, Jack?"

"I say," answered Jack, "that we can not only complete our preparations in the time given us, but have plenty of time for play afterwards. As a matter of fact, our preparations are practically complete already. We have nothing to do except blow up the bridge, and that we will do as soon as you, Don Hermoso, and the Señora are far enough on your way to Pinar to be safe from pursuit. Then we will teach these arrogant Spaniards a much-needed lesson on the desirability of modifying their tyrannical methods."

"What do you mean, Jack?" demanded Don Hermoso. "Do you imagine for a moment that I will seek safety in flight, and leave you two lads to defend my property for me?"

"No, Señor, I don't mean that at all," answered Jack. "What I mean is this: the natural situation of the place is happily such that, with the preparations already made for its defence, and perhaps one or two more which we can easily make to-morrow morning, we can without difficulty hold the estate against a much stronger force than that encamped on the plain below; and therefore there is not the slightest reason why you should not remove the Señora from the turmoil and excitement of the fight which is sure to come to-morrow."

"I see," said Don Hermoso. "It is the same thing, however, stated in different words. 'The turmoil and excitement of the fight', as you put it, will scarcely be perceptible here, in the house, and will therefore not be likely to have any injurious effect upon my wife, who must be induced to remain indoors while we are arguing the point with the Spaniards. I shall therefore remain and take my share of the risks with you."

And from this resolution Don Hermoso was not to be moved.

Chapter Seventeen.

Wiped out.

With the first sign of dawn on the following morning the Montijo estate became a scene of bustling activity; for, as Jack observed, since fight they must, they might as well begin early and get it over during the hours of daylight. Jack and Carlos, who had, with the tacit consent of Don Hermoso, jointly assumed the responsibility of defending the place, had, on the previous night, held a short council of war, and had finally come to the conclusion that of the two vulnerable points of attack which still remained, that which they had by common consent come to speak of as the "cross-country route" was the weaker, since at one point the river was so narrow that it could be jumped by a horseman, and consequently was capable of being temporarily bridged without much difficulty. The defence of this position, therefore, Carlos insisted on personally undertaking, with the assistance of a force consisting of two-thirds of the negroes employed upon the estate; while Jack, with the other third, was to defend the approach by way of the main road and the mined bridge. It was also arranged that Jack was to have the twelve-pounder field gun, while Carlos took the two Maxims.

Now, it happened that while the two youths were making these final dispositions, it occurred to Don Hermoso that the attack upon his estate would afford Antonio Maceo and his four thousand guerrillas up there in the mountains a splendid opportunity to come down and take the Spaniards in the rear; he therefore retired to his own room, wrote a long letter to Maceo, in which he fully set forth all the particulars of the situation, and dispatched it by the hands of a trusty negro by way of the ravine and gorge where Alvaros was supposed to have died, the negro asserting his ability to cross the gorge at the waterfall by means of a pine tree which he would cut down in such a manner as to cause it to fall across the gap, and which he would afterwards throw into the abyss, returning to the estate, after the execution of his mission, with Maceo and his men.

The reveille was just sounding in the Spanish camp when Jack, having placed his forces in position in open order behind a screen of bamboo and scrub which completely commanded the approach to the mined bridge, and also effectually masked the position of his twelve-pounder, proceeded down the road alone for the purpose of destroying the bridge. Ten minutes later a deep boom, accompanied by a volcanic upheaval of dust and débris, announced the successful accomplishment of the task, at the same time that it startled the Spanish soldiery and aroused the curiosity and suspicion of the Spanish general, who at once dispatched a small reconnoitring party to investigate the nature of the explosion. Jack, who had waited to examine the result of his engineering experiment, and had seen with much satisfaction that, while the crown of the arch was completely destroyed, rendering the bridge absolutely impassable, it would be a simple matter to repair the damage later on, observed the approach of the party, and at once determined to await it, deeming it an excellent opportunity to establish a clear understanding with the Spaniards and bring matters at once to an issue. Accordingly, he stood there, on his own side of the wrecked bridge, in clear view of the approaching reconnoitring party, and patiently awaited its arrival.

Presently the officer in charge of the party, catching sight of him, galloped forward alone and, reining up on the opposite side of the gap in the bridge, indignantly demanded:

"Hola, Señor! What is the meaning of this, and who is responsible for the deed?"

"I am responsible for it," answered Jack; "and it means that Señor Montijo is not disposed to tamely submit to the destruction of his property. You may therefore return to General Echaguë and inform him that we have placed the estate in a condition of defence; that we are prepared to resist attack to the last gasp; and that if he is ill-advised enough to persist in his attempt at destruction, he, and he only, will be responsible for the bloodshed that must ensue."

"It is well, Señor," answered the officer; "I will tell the General what you say. And you, in turn, may inform Señor Montijo that if he persists in his mad resolve to resist us, his blood and that of every soul who takes part with him will be on his own head: for General Echaguë is in no mood to deal leniently with rebels; when he turns his back upon you a few hours hence the estate will be a blackened, fire-scorched waste, and every man, woman, and child upon it will have been put to the sword!"

And, wheeling his horse, with a swaggering show of contemptuous indifference to possible danger he rode slowly away.

Jack watched the party until it had returned to the camp, and the officer in command had made his report; and then, seeing that the Spanish troops were to be allowed to get breakfast before being led to the attack, he dispatched Calderon—who had undertaken to perform the duties of galloper—to Carlos with a message to the effect that no immediate attack was to be expected. Then, having posted sentries and given his own contingent instructions to get their breakfast at once, where they were, he mounted his horse and galloped up to the house to snatch the meal which he knew would by this time be ready for him. It was a hurried meal, of course, but it was none the less welcome on that account, and it imparted that feeling of refreshment and vigour which is so comforting to a man who is about to engage in a possibly long and arduous fight; while it also afforded him the opportunity to personally acquaint Don Hermoso and Carlos—who also presently came in—with the details of what had passed between him and the Spanish officer.

Then, having fortified himself with food, Jack returned to his post, to find his negro forces busily discussing their own breakfast, which they finished nearly half an hour before there was any sign of movement in the Spanish camp. At length, however, the blare of bugles and the rattle of drums gave intimation that a movement of some sort was impending; and presently the troops were seen to be mustering under arms. They consisted, as Jack soon saw,

mainly of infantry: but there was a small body of cavalry with them, about fifty in number; and they also had two light field pieces, each drawn by six mules.

While the infantry were forming up, and the mules were being put to the guns, the general and his staff suddenly rode out of camp and advanced along the main road, with the evident intention of reconnoitring the menaced position and ascertaining the most promising point of attack. But Jack had no idea of allowing them to gain even so much advantage as that; he therefore moved among his men, and selecting some twenty of the best shots, rapidly transferred them to another patch of cover which commanded the junction of the private with the main road, and instructed them to open fire upon the reconnoitring party the moment that it should come into view, himself remaining with them to encourage and give them confidence. He had scarcely got his little body of sharpshooters into position when the leading files of the reconnoitring party appeared in sight at the junction of the two roads, evidently bent upon examining the wrecked bridge; and Jack, waiting only until the entire body came into view, gave the order to fire. The effect was disastrous to the Spaniards, for the negroes, concealed as they were, and confident of their own absolute safety, took aim with the utmost coolness and deliberation, with the result that seven out of the dozen saddles were emptied, while the general and another officer had their horses shot under them. There was an immediate wild stampede of the survivors, the two dismounted men contriving with difficulty to catch and mount a couple of riderless horses; and ere they had got beyond range two more men and three more horses were bowled over by the main body of Jack's negroes, who had the adventurous party in view as soon as they were lost to sight by the band of sharpshooters nearer the bridge.

Upon regaining his camp the Spanish general at once ordered forward his two field guns, his instructions to the artillerymen apparently being to shell the little clump of cover in which Jack had concealed his sharpshooters. But the latter, despite his youth and inexperience, was shrewd enough to foresee some such move as this, and accordingly he had no sooner put the reconnoitring party to flight than he withdrew his men from their place of concealment and marched them back to rejoin their comrades, taking care to keep them all together, for he had a very strong suspicion that he would again need them for special service ere long.

The guns were advanced at a gallop, brought to action front, and unlimbered, all with very creditable smartness; and the next moment shell fire was opened by both weapons upon the little patch of cover just vacated by Jack's marksmen. The aim was good, shell after shell dropping so close to where those marksmen had been concealed that within the first five minutes they must all have been destroyed had they remained there, even although about two out of every three shells failed to explode. The Spanish general was soon convinced that his guns had accomplished their mission, for when they had fired some thirty shells a galloper was seen approaching the artillery officer, and the next moment that individual gave the word to cease fire and limber up. At the word, the drivers put their mules into motion and advanced toward the guns; whereupon Jack, who had been patiently awaiting this movement, gave an order to his sharpshooters, who immediately opened fire upon the teams, with the result that before the guns could be moved every animal was down. Then the artillerymen themselves attempted to drag the weapons away, upon which they also began to drop; and at length a squad of cavalry was dispatched to move the weapons. But they were obliged to gallop nearly half a mile across Jack's front, within range the whole time; and, although they covered the ground at a good pace, so hot was the fire maintained upon them, and so deadly the aim, that not one of the horsemen was able to reach the guns: Jack had got the weapons under the cover of his rifles, and he did not mean to let them go.

But Singleton soon had something else than the two guns of the enemy to think about; for while he had been concentrating his attention upon the two field pieces, the entire body of troops had begun to move, and were advancing, in two columns, with the evident intention of endeavouring to force the passage of the stream somewhere in the neighbourhood of the ruined bridge: apparently they were unaware of the existence of the still weaker position which Carlos had undertaken to defend. Through some strange oversight or carelessness on the part of their commander, they were advancing in close order, and Jack felt that now was the moment when his twelve-pounder was likely to prove useful. He intended to captain the gun himself, and had caused it to be loaded with shrapnel some time before: and he therefore now carefully aimed the weapon at a certain spot over which the troops must pass, and the distance of which he knew almost to an inch. Then, waiting patiently until the leading column was within about three yards of it, he fired. The shell appeared to strike the ground and explode almost at the feet of the advancing troops, and when the smoke of the explosion cleared away it was seen that an enormous gap had been made in the advancing column, which had been thrown into the utmost confusion, those men in the immediate vicinity of the gap, on either side of it, having halted in dismay, while the right and left wings had continued to advance; and in the midst of the gap could be seen a long swath of prostrate men, the most of whom were lying horribly and unnaturally still. It was pitiable to see those men, many of them scarcely out of their boyhood, led forth to die in support of grinding, unendurable tyranny and misgovernment: yet that was not the moment in which to indulge a feeling of mistaken humanitarian sentiment—mistaken, because Jack knew that unless those same men could be driven off they would be remorselessly used as the instruments of ruthless destruction and indiscriminate slaughter; so, while the confusion among the ranks was still at its height, he ordered the gun to be reloaded, and again plumped a shell right in the very midst of them.

This second shell appeared to have been even more terribly destructive in its effects than the first, for the two columns were, when it fell, bunched close together, and it seemed to have dropped where the men were thickest; and ere the now demoralised troops could recover from the panic into which they had been thrown, their ranks were yet more disastrously thinned, a rattling crash of Maxim fire from Carlos' position indicating the direction from which this new punishment had come. But by this time General Echaguë had begun to recover his presence of mind. He saw that to attempt to advance farther in close formation in the face of such a withering fire would be suicidal, and he gave the word for his men to take open order, which they instantly did: and a moment later a slight change in the formation of the attacking troops showed that while the leading column was intended to be used in forcing the passage of the river at the point where the bridge had been destroyed, the other column had been diverted to attack the position which Carlos had undertaken to defend.

The troops, having taken open order, were next ordered to lie down and thus minimise their exposure as far as

possible; and in this posture they advanced to the attack, creeping gradually forward and firing independently at any spot where the flash of a rifle, or a puff of smoke, showed that an enemy lay concealed. There was one small party of men in particular that attracted Jack's attention, and a careful inspection of them through his glasses showed that they were provided with something which had the appearance of scaling ladders, which they were laboriously dragging after them, and which Singleton very shrewdly suspected were intended to span the gap in the broken bridge and thus afford a passage for the troops across the river. To these men, and to the cavalry who were still persistently endeavouring to recover the possession and use of the two field pieces, Jack commended the especial attention of his negroes, leaving the remainder of the Spanish troops to be dealt with a little later on; for, the defenders being safely ensconced in cover, the rifle fire of the attacking party was absolutely harmless to them, and the young Englishman felt that so long as he could keep the party with the scaling ladders at arm's length, and the field pieces from being used against him, he was practically master of the situation. And these two objects he gained most successfully, the party with the ladders very soon being wiped out, while all attempts on the part of the main body to supply its place were effectually frustrated; while, as for the guns, by the time that the cavalry-men had lost rather more than a quarter of their number they had evidently arrived at the conclusion that to move the pieces from the exposed position which they occupied was an impossible task, and they accordingly abandoned it, turning their attention next to the position which Carlos was defending.

The unequal fight had been in progress for nearly two hours, during which Singleton's party had experienced less than a dozen casualties, while the enemy, exposed in the open, had suffered very severely, when another body of men suddenly made their appearance in the rear of the Spanish forces, and, with howls and yells of vengeful delight, rushed forward to the attack. A small flag of Cuba Libre which was borne in their midst proclaimed them to be a body of revolutionaries, and the Spanish troops were hastily called off from the attack on the estate and formed up in square to receive them. But the Spaniards might as well have attempted to stop the wind as to stem the onrush of those fierce and determined men, who were, moreover, in overwhelming numbers; they had time only to pour in a couple of hasty, ill-directed volleys, and then the Cubans—armed, some with rifles, and others with swords, cane-knives, machetes, scythe blades, pikes, hatchets, ay, and even crowbars and smiths' hammers—swept down upon and overwhelmed them. For the space of perhaps three minutes there was a hideous mêlée, a confused mass of men struggling, yelling, shrieking; a popping of pistol shots, a whirling and flashing of blades in the sun; and then out from the midst of the confusion there emerged a bare half-dozen of panic-stricken horsemen, who set spurs to their frantic steeds and galloped for their lives off that fatal field. Another Spanish force had been wiped out by the insurgents!

Half an hour later, when the dead had been stripped of their weapons and ammunition, Antonio Maceo and a little body of his subordinate officers, using the scaling ladders left on the field by the Spaniards, crossed the gap in the wrecked bridge, and made their way up to the house for the purpose of thanking Don Hermoso for the letter of warning which he had dispatched to them, and with a request for the loan of all the spades and other tools which he could spare to enable the insurgents to bury the dead: and by sunset that night a long, low mound of fresh-turned earth, showing red amid the vivid green of the grass-grown plain, was all that was left as evidence of the tragedy; while Maceo and his four thousand patriots were wearily wending their way back to their mountain fastness, the richer by two six-pounder field guns, a thousand stand of arms, with a considerable quantity of ammunition, and the entire spoils of the Spanish camp.

It was subsequently ascertained that General Echaguë and five of his staff had succeeded in making good their escape from that field of slaughter; and as it was anticipated that the Spaniards, infuriated by their terrible reverse, would be more than likely to seek an early revenge, Jack and Carlos were kept very busy during the ensuing fortnight in so far improving the defences of the estate as to render it practically impregnable. The remains of the wrecked stone bridge were removed, and a timber drawbridge was built in its place; entrenchments were dug commanding the approach to it and to the one or two other spots where it was thought that the passage of the river might possibly be forced; a further supply of ammunition was sent for; and a small lookout and semaphore station was constructed on the hillside, at a point which commanded a view of every possible approach to the estate. And then ensued a period of rather trying inactivity, during which Jack and Carlos were kept constantly on the tenterhooks of expectancy, vainly striving to get some inkling of the intentions of the enemy.

Then at length came the news that General Weyler, baffled in his efforts to force a general engagement with the enemy, and galled by the constant heavy losses which he was sustaining, through the ravages of disease and at the hands of the insurgents, had issued an order for the concentration of the entire rural population in the fortified towns, in order that they might thus be prevented from supplying the various bands of armed revolutionaries with provisions and other necessaries. The effect of this cruel and tyrannical order was to drive practically every man into the ranks of the rebels—since he could no longer follow his vocation without exposing himself to severe punishment for disobedience; while the women and children, to the number of some sixty thousand, were perforce obliged to obey the decree, and, forsaking their homes, betake themselves to the towns. But no sooner had they done so than it became apparent that no sufficient provision had been made for their maintenance; and, since it was impossible for them to earn a living for themselves, the suffering and loss of life among these unfortunates quickly assumed appalling proportions, to the horror and indignation of the American people, who had been watching, with steadily and rapidly growing disapproval, the peculiar methods of the Spaniards for the suppression of the rebellion. It was the opinion of America, indeed—and not of America alone, it may be said—that there would have been no rebellion in Cuba but for the gross corruption and inefficiency of the local government; and that the proper method of suppression was, not force of arms, but the introduction of reforms into the system of government. The fact is, that the state of affairs in Cuba was generating a strong and increasing feeling of hostility between the United States of America and Spain; for while, on the one hand, the outspoken comments of the American press deeply wounded the sensitive pride of the Spanish nation, which could ill brook anything that even in the remotest degree savoured of censure, or of interference with its own private affairs, the determination of that nation to manage those affairs in such manner as seemed to it most fit led to many ill-advised acts, tending to further strengthen the sympathy of the freedom-loving American for the oppressed and persecuted Cuban—a sympathy which found expression in the generous supply of munitions of war to the insurgents. This feeling of mutual hostility was further strengthened about this time—that is to say, in June of the year 1896—by what was spoken of at the time as the *Competitor* incident. The

Competitor was a vessel manned by a crew consisting, with one solitary exception, of citizens of the United States; and in the month above-named she was surprised and captured on the north-west coast of the island by the Spanish authorities, immediately after landing a cargo of arms and ammunition destined for Maceo and his little army of patriots. The crew of the ship were forthwith tried by court martial and sentenced to be shot: but under the treaties existing between the United States and Spain it was specially provided that, unless American citizens were actually in arms against Spain when captured, they could only be proceeded against before the ordinary tribunals; the United States, therefore, through General Lee, its Consul-General in Havana, promptly intervened on behalf of the crew, declaring that their trial by court martial was illegal. Spain as promptly retorted that she was perfectly justified in the action which she had taken, and manifested a very strong disposition to abide by the decision of the court martial, and execute its sentence. But the United States remained so inflexibly firm, and made it so clear that it would tolerate no departure whatsoever from the terms of the treaty, that Spain, after holding out as long as she dared, was at length compelled to yield and order a new trial by ordinary process; with the result that the ship's crew, after having been kept for a long time in prison, were eventually released and expelled from the island. This incident greatly embittered the relations between the two nations, Spain especially resenting the humiliation of defeat; and there seems very little doubt that it was the primal cause which led up to the Spanish-American War.

One day, as the little party at the casa Montijo were about to sit down to second breakfast, Antonio Maceo suddenly made his appearance.

"Good-day, Señores!" he exclaimed, as he mounted the steps leading to the front veranda. "Good-day, Señora! And how are you to-day?"

"Quite well, thank you, Señor," answered the Señora. "And you? But I need scarcely ask; the mountain air evidently agrees with you. This is a quite unexpected pleasure, Señor Antonio."

"You mean my visit to you, Señora? It is very good of you to say so. Not knowing what facilities you may have for obtaining news, I thought I would come down to let you know that I believe we have at length driven the Spaniards completely out of the neighbourhood. Your friend General Echaguè attacked us in force about a month ago, with the avowed determination, as I have since learned, of dislodging us from our stronghold; and we had the most splendid fight that I have ever participated in. We allowed him to gradually drive us back some six miles into the mountains, until we had drawn him into a very carefully prepared ambushade, and there we punished him so severely that I believe he will not again dare to trouble us, especially as I learn that the general himself was severely wounded. But," he continued, taking Don Hermoso by the arm and leading him to the end of the veranda, out of earshot of the Señora, "that is not what I came down to tell you. I learned, only yesterday, that that fiend Weyler, maddened by his inability to check the progress of the rebellion, and the failure of his arms generally, has personally taken the field at the head of an army of sixty thousand men, and is marching through Havana, on his way to Pinar del Rio, carrying fire and sword through the province, and leaving behind him nothing but black and blood-stained ruin. Before he left Havana he proclaimed that a free pardon would be granted to all insurgents who should choose to surrender themselves to the Spanish authorities, and a certain number of those among us who have become incapacitated through sickness have, with the consent of the leaders, accepted his offer: but their surrender, so far from weakening us, has strengthened our hands, for we no longer have them to nurse and look after. But he has also issued another order, to the effect that the Spanish troops, while marching through the country, will henceforth destroy all buildings, crops, cattle, and other property which may be capable of sheltering or assisting the insurgents in any way whatsoever; and, furthermore, that all persons met with who have disobeyed the 'concentration' order will be treated as rebels—which means that they will be tried by drum-head court martial and shot. I don't know whether or not you have yet heard this news, Señor Hermoso, but you have aided us thus far in so magnificently generous a manner that I deemed it my duty to come down and make certain, and also to warn you of what you may expect if Weyler should happen to find you here. As for me, I have come to the conclusion that I can do no good by remaining pent up among the mountains, while it is equally certain that with four thousand men I cannot hope successfully to encounter Weyler and his sixty thousand. I have therefore determined to endeavour to slip through the *trocha* and demonstrate against Havana, in the hope that Weyler will thus be induced to abandon his march and return to protect the city. So far as you are concerned, my advice to you is that you leave this place at once, and either accompany me or fly to some place of safety, whichever you please. But in either case you cannot do better, I think, than turn all your negroes over to me, with such arms as you can spare."

"Come in and take some breakfast with us," said Don Hermoso. "This is serious news indeed, and what it is best to do, under the circumstances, is a matter that is not to be decided in a moment; it needs careful consideration, and therefore I will talk it over after breakfast with you—if you can spare me an hour or two—my son, and the young Englishman, who, although only a lad, seems to have a man's head on his shoulders. My present inclination is to remain where I am, and let Weyler do his worst. I believe that, with the dispositions which we have made since Echague's attack upon us, we can hold the estate against all comers."

And when, after an hour's earnest conference a little later on in the day, and a tour of the estate in the company of Don Hermoso, Carlos, and Jack, Antonio Maceo took his leave, in order to return to his men among the mountains, he expressed the opinion that, given an ample supply of ammunition, and a sufficient store of provisions, it was just possible that Don Hermoso might be able to hold even Weyler and his sixty thousand men at bay. Whereupon it was decided that the attempt should be made.

Chapter Eighteen.

A gallant defence.

It is not to be supposed that so momentous a decision as that mentioned at the close of the last chapter could be arrived at without bringing the occupants of the hacienda face to face with many anxieties, one of the most serious of

which was, undoubtedly, the question whether the ammunition for which they had sent would arrive ere the appearance upon the scene of General Valeriano y Nicolán Weyler, with his devastating army of sixty thousand men. If it did, all might possibly be well; but if it did not—well, in that case disaster was practically certain. For nearly a week they hung painfully upon the tenterhooks of suspense, waiting for news; and the only news which reached them was to the effect that the new Capitan-General, with characteristic vigour, had issued the most rigorous instructions for a vigilant patrol of the entire coast line of the island to be maintained, with the express object of preventing any further landing of munitions of war of any description whatsoever, the obvious conclusion at which he had arrived being that if such supplies could be effectually stopped the rebellion must eventually be starved out of existence for want of them. But, after a long week of keenest anxiety, intelligence arrived that Milsom had succeeded in eluding the *guardacostas*, and had landed his cargo in a small cove under the lee of San Domingo Point, on the south coast; and that the moiety of that cargo asked for by Don Hermoso was even then well on its way to the estate. The next day it arrived, and was safely stored, to the great relief of the defenders, who now found themselves possessed of a supply of ammunition ample enough to enable them, with care, to withstand a siege of a month's duration, if need be; while they doubted very much whether General Weyler would be disposed to devote even half that amount of time to their subjugation.

But the ammunition came to hand only just in the nick of time: for on the very day of its arrival the anxious watchers became aware of a faint odour of burning on the breeze; and when at length darkness closed down upon them, the sky to the eastward glowed red, showing that Weyler and his destroyers were at hand. With the dawn the smell of burning became more pronounced; the hitherto crystalline clearness of the air was seen to be dimmed by a thin veil of brownish-blue vapour; and the lookout in his eyrie far up the mountain-side signalled that flames and thick smoke were visible in the direction of Consolacion del Sur. As the day progressed the haze with which the air was charged grew thicker, the taint of fire and smoke more pungent, and an occasional vibration of the atmosphere suggested to those who became conscious of it the boom of distant artillery; while with the approach of nightfall the whole of the eastern sky became suffused with a flickering, ruddy light, the lookout up the mountain signalling that the entire country to the eastward, as far as the eye could see, seemed to be in flames.

On the morrow all these signs of destruction became very greatly accentuated: with the passage of every hour the atmosphere became more thickly charged with smoke, more pungent with the smell of burning; clouds of black ash darkened the sky from time to time, as they were swept along upon the wings of the strong breeze; dense columns of smoke rising here and there showed where the spoilers were at work upon properties so near at hand that they could now be identified and named; while the frequent rattle and crash of rifle fire seemed to indicate that there were others who, like Don Hermoso, were not prepared to stand supinely by and see their entire possessions destroyed. Work was still being carried on by Don Hermoso's *employés*, but they had been turned to that morning with the injunction that at the sound of the alarm bell they were to instantly drop their tools and muster before the shed in which the arms were stored. As for Singleton and Carlos Montijo, they had jumped into the saddle at daybreak, and were maintaining a ceaseless patrol of the boundaries of the estate, riding in opposite directions, and encountering each other from time to time, when they would exchange such items of information as they might happen to have gleaned in the interim.

All through the morning the work of destruction proceeded apace: the atmosphere became hourly thicker and more suffocating with smoke; great tongues of flame could occasionally be seen leaping skyward here and there above the tops of trees; dull boomings from time to time told of the blowing up of buildings; intermittent crashes of volley firing, mingled with shouts and yells and shrieks, told that desperate fights were raging—or that, perchance, some ruthless and summary execution was taking place; and by and by, shortly after mid-day, a solitary horseman, mounted upon a steed in a lather of sweat and recognised by Carlos as their next neighbour to the eastward, came galloping over the temporary drawbridge with a warning to Don Hermoso to fly, with all his family and dependents, since Weyler, with his army of butchers, was already approaching in such overpowering strength that nothing could possibly stand before him. The poor fellow gasped out a breathless story of ruthlessly savage murder and destruction, telling how he had seen every atom of his property looted and burnt, every member of his family shot down; and how he had at the last moment escaped by the skin of his teeth, with the horse he rode and the clothes that he stood up in as his sole remaining possessions in the world. He had effected his escape with some mad idea of flying for his life somewhere, he knew not whither; but upon learning that Don Hermoso was resolved to defend his property to the last, the poor fellow—a certain Don Luis Enrile—begged permission to be allowed to remain and assist in the defence, since he was now a ruined man and had nothing left to live for save revenge. Naturally, Don Hermoso readily acceded to his request.

The unhappy Don Luis, having drawn, in broken, gasping sentences, the main outlines of his tragical story, was still filling in some of the more lurid details of that morning's happenings upon his farm, when the lookout perched aloft on the hillside signalled the approach of the enemy; and while Carlos dashed off in one direction to sound the alarm bell and occupy his former defence post, Jack rushed off in the other to raise the temporary drawbridge which had been constructed to take the place of the wrecked stone bridge, and which was now the only means of entering upon and leaving the estate. Having raised the bridge, and carefully secured it against any possibility of becoming lowered by accident, Jack climbed the structure to its uplifted extremity, and from thence looked out over the wide plain that gently sloped away toward the east, south, and west of him; and presently he became aware of a loud, confused, rumbling jumble of sound which, when he was presently able to dissect it, resolved itself into a mingled trampling of multitudinous feet and hoofs, a rumbling and creaking of many wheels, the combined murmur of many human voices, the occasional low, deep, protesting bellow of overdriven animals, the crack of whips, and the continuous shouts of men. The air was still thick with acrid smoke, rendering it difficult to see anything clearly at a distance greater than half a mile; but presently it thickened still more, and Jack recognised that the thickening was produced by a great cloud of dun-coloured dust, out of the midst of which there presently cantered into view a number of Spanish cavalry scouts, a dozen of whom, upon reaching the main road, wheeled to their right and dashed along it toward the point of its junction with the private road leading to Don Hermoso's estate.

Jack considered that the moment had now arrived for him to quit his post of observation, and he accordingly slid

down the rail of the bridge until he reached the ground, where he was almost immediately joined by the contingent of labourers which was to operate under him, as before, for the defence of the estate at that point. The wood away to the left, and the bamboo coppice, afforded perfect cover and shelter for the whole of his party; and since each man now knew to an inch where he was required to post himself, everybody was in position and entirely hidden from sight a full minute before the leading couple of the cavalry came into view round the bend of the road leading to the ruined bridge. But no sooner did that leading couple appear than two whiplike rifle reports snapped out from somewhere in front of them, and while one rider dropped forward and collapsed on his horse's neck, the other flung up his arms, tossed away the carbine which he was carrying in his right hand, and reeled out of the saddle to the ground with a crash, while his horse, tossing up his head, wheeled sharply round and dashed off to the rear, dragging his dead rider by the left stirrup. The next instant another pair of scouts swung into view, when again out snapped that ominous, double, whiplike crack. This time one of the two riders, dropping his carbine to the ground, clapped his right hand convulsively to his breast as he swiftly wheeled his horse and galloped off; while the horse of his companion, rearing upright and pawing the air furiously for a moment with his fore hoofs, fell backward with a crash and lay dead, pinning his helpless rider beneath him: whereupon the remainder of the party wheeled their horses, and, dashing in their spurs, took to precipitate flight.

Shortly afterwards, doubtless in consequence of the report of those men, another reconnoitring party, consisting of half a dozen brilliantly-garbed officers, approached, evidently with the idea of inspecting the nature of the defences of the estate, and ascertaining its weak points. But Jack would have none of it; the moment that they came within point-blank rifle range he opened fire upon them with his sharpshooters, and only three of the half-dozen were able to make good their retreat.

Meanwhile the main body of troops gradually debouched into view upon the plain—a motley crowd of infantry clad in rags so effectually bleached and discoloured by exposure to rain and sun that it would probably have puzzled their own officers to name the various regiments to which they belonged; about one hundred cavalry; and three batteries of field artillery: the whole accompanied by an enormous number of baggage, ambulance, and ammunition wagons, water carts, and nondescript vehicles of every imaginable description, and an immense lowing, bellowing, and bleating herd of captured cattle, sheep, and goats, many of which seemed to be half-mad with terror. Mounted officers in scores dashed frantically to and fro among this medley of men, vehicles, and animals; and finally, when the herd of cattle was at length separated from the main body and driven off, a detachment of some three thousand men, and one battery of guns, with a proportion of the wagons and other vehicles, halted on the plain, with the evident intention of attacking the estate, while the remainder of the body went forward.

The attack began immediately. A puff or two of white smoke had revealed to the reconnoitring parties the lurking-place of those who had fired upon them, and they had of course pointed out the spot to the artillerymen as that upon which they were to concentrate their fire; with the result that immediately the guns were wheeled to action front, they opened a hot fire upon the bamboo coppice. But, as on the occasion of the previous attack, no sooner had the reconnoitring parties withdrawn than Jack moved his sharpshooters from their cover of bamboo to that of a line of artfully constructed earthworks, which, while far enough removed from the bamboos to be perfectly safe from the artillery fire which he felt certain would be immediately opened upon them, equally commanded the road leading to the ruined bridge, and enabled him to effectually check all endeavours to reconnoitre that point of approach. The result was that after the bamboos had been fiercely shelled for some ten minutes, without producing a single casualty among the defenders, another reconnoitring party, believing that that particular patch of cover had been pretty effectually cleared, boldly galloped forward, under cover of the continued shell fire, to examine the spot which, from the resolution with which it had been defended, they felt convinced must be one of the keys of the position. And there is little doubt that they were as much surprised as disgusted to be received with a volley, from a totally different and not easily discernible point, which caused them to again retire precipitately, leaving nearly two-thirds of their number behind them.

Finding himself thus persistently foiled, the officer in command slightly altered his tactics; and, while instructing his artillery to persistently shell every bit of timber or other cover that could possibly afford concealment to the defenders, deployed his infantry into a column of open order and threw out a strong firing line, with instructions to them to advance, taking advantage of every bit of cover that they could find, and shoot at every puff of smoke that they could see. As on the occasion of the previous attack, many of the Spanish shells failed to burst; but, notwithstanding this, a few casualties now began to occur among Jack's party of defenders, and he therefore decided that the moment had arrived for bringing his twelve-pounder into action. This gun, accordingly, which Jack had by this time got mounted on a cleverly-constructed and carefully-masked earth battery, now opened fire upon the enemy's artillery; and as Singleton had personally laid the piece, and knew the exact range to practically an inch, he was lucky enough to dismount and put out of action one of the Spanish guns with his first shot, while his second swept away every one of the artillerymen from the gun next to it. His third and fourth shots did comparatively little damage; but his fifth shell struck one of the guns fair upon the muzzle, at the precise moment when it was being fired, with the result that both shells burst simultaneously, completely shattering the fore part of the gun, as far back as the trunnions, and scattering death and destruction broadcast among the rest of the artillerymen. But by this time the Spanish gunners had managed to locate the position of the weapon that was punishing them so fearfully, and from that moment they devoted their attention exclusively to it, with the result that shells began to drop thick and fast about Jack's ears, smothering and half-blinding him with dust, and occasionally peppering him pretty smartly with the pebbles and fragments of stone that were mingled with the earth of which his battery was composed. Still he gallantly maintained the unequal fight, and actually succeeded in disabling four out of the six guns ere a splinter of shell struck him on the temple and knocked him senseless. When he recovered, he found that darkness was closing down; that he was in his own room and on his own bed, whither he had been brought by an ambulance party of his men; and that Mamá Faquita, poor Señorita Isolda's nurse, had taken him in charge, cleaned and dressed his wound, and was looking after him generally. An intermittent crackle of rifle fire told him that the attack was still being pressed, but Faquita informed him that there had been very few serious casualties thus far, and that all was going well. The old woman would fain have kept him confined to his room; but Jack knew that with the darkness would come the real danger, and despite his nurse's vehement protests he not only rose from his bed, but returned to the

spot which his contingent of men were still defending.

Arrived there, he soon found that events had been happening during his absence. In the first place, it appeared that the remainder of the gun's crew had continued to work the twelve-pounder, and, after firing away a perfectly ruinous quantity of ammunition, had actually succeeded in disabling one of the two remaining Spanish guns; soon after accomplishing which feat, the twelve-pounder itself had been dismantled and put out of action by a shell which had completely destroyed the carriage and at the same time had slain four of the gunners. Whereupon a little party of sharpshooters, remembering the tactics that Jack had adopted during the previous attack upon the estate, had exclusively devoted themselves to a repetition of them, by first of all exterminating the entire crew of the remaining Spanish gun, and then rendering it impossible for anyone else to approach the gun to work it. Meanwhile, the officer in command, finding it useless to try to do anything with his men, exposed as they were upon the open plain, had withdrawn them out of gunshot and gone into camp. It was clear that he proposed to wait until the darkness came to veil his movements.

Jack quite anticipated that the first thing which the Spaniards would attempt would be to reconnoitre the entire position, with the object of finding a way to get across the river; and he knew that there were only two points at which this feat of crossing was possible, namely, those which Carlos and he were defending. He therefore scribbled a little note to his friend, warning the latter what to guard against, and dispatched it by a negro messenger, whom he also instructed to afterwards call at the house and bring from thence a pair of binocular glasses which were to be found on a table in his (Jack's) bedroom.

By the time that the messenger returned with the glasses it had grown intensely dark: for to the natural obscurity of night there was added the further obscuration caused by the smoke with which the atmosphere was laden; while, to still further intensify the blackness, a heavy thunderstorm was working up against the wind, the combined result being a darkness in which it was literally impossible to see one's hand before one's face. Jack was at first inclined to anathematise the darkness; but when at length he was enabled to fully realise the intensity of it he felt much more disposed to bless it, for, having moved about half a dozen paces away from his post, and experienced some difficulty in finding his way back, he began to comfort himself with the reflection that the enemy, utterly strange to the country as they were, could do nothing until light enough should come to at least enable them to see where to put their feet.

Yet Jack was mistaken in so supposing, for as the time went on he became aware of certain sounds out there on the plain which seemed to indicate pretty unmistakably that, despite the darkness, the Spaniards were busily employed. When the moaning and sighing of the night wind among the branches of the trees, the rustle of the bamboos, and the clash of the palm leaves subsided for an instant, allowing more distant sounds to reach his ears, he intermittently caught what seemed to be the sounds of picks and shovels at work at no very great distance; moreover, there were lights flitting about the distant camp, and much movement there, though what it portended Jack was quite unable to discover, even with the help of his night glasses. At length, however, the period of darkness came to an end, for sheet lightning began to flicker and quiver among the densely packed clouds low down on the western horizon, at first for an instant only and at comparatively long intervals, but soon increasing greatly in vividness and rapidity: and then the young Englishman perceived, to his disgust and alarm, that the Spanish soldiers had availed themselves of the obscurity not only to entrench a strong body of riflemen to right and left of their own end of the ruined bridge, but also to advance a long, light platform, or gangway, mounted on the wheels of one of the disabled field pieces, which they seemed to be preparing to throw across the gap in the bridge as soon as they could get sufficient light to enable them to run it into position; indeed, they were actually engaged in moving it forward at the very moment when Jack discovered its existence.

To bring up his men, and place them in a position among the bamboos which would enable them to frustrate this bold attempt to span the river was the work of but a minute or two for Jack; then he immediately opened a hot fire upon the working party who were engaged in moving forward the gangway. But no sooner had he done this than he found how seriously the conditions had changed for the worse during those two hours of total darkness; for now the Spaniards who had established themselves in the trenches were so close at hand that the cover of the bamboos was no longer an efficient defence, and casualties among the defenders became disconcertingly frequent. Furthermore, it soon appeared that the Spaniards had got two strong hauling parties sheltered behind a couple of low earthworks, and that these people, by means of two stout ropes attached to the gangway, were steadily and with much skill hauling the thing toward the required position. Jack soon saw, however, that it would be quite impossible for the hauling parties to haul it far enough forward to enable it to be dropped into position across the gap in the ruined bridge: a moment must come, sooner or later, when the concealed men who were dragging upon the ropes would be obliged to leave their cover and push the platform the remaining portion of the distance; and he quickly determined to reserve his energies and his ammunition until that moment.

The time quickly arrived. A single bugle blast appeared to be the signal for the entrenched Spanish riflemen to concentrate their fire upon the clump of bamboo brake wherein Jack had hidden his men, and at the same instant about a hundred infantry-men sprang from behind their sheltering earthwork and made a dash at the platform, their every movement being clearly visible by the light of the vivid electric discharges which had by this time become practically continuous. With the utmost resolution they seized the light structure and started to run it forward toward the gap in the bridge; but—Jack having by this time instilled into his dusky troops the virtue of coolness and deliberation in fighting—the next moment they were swept back to cover by a perfectly withering fire that placed nearly half of them *hors de combat*.

Meanwhile sounds of hot and sustained firing had gradually breezed up in the direction of the position which Carlos was defending, and ere long it became evident that there also the attack was being pressed; and although the sounds of strife thitherward were soon almost swallowed up in the long, continuous crash and crackle of the rifle fire that was being maintained by the entrenched troops upon Jack's party, the young Englishman could not avoid the suspicion that his friend was being somewhat hardly pressed; for whenever a momentary lull occurred in the firing in front of him, Jack could not only hear that the volume of firing in Carlos' direction was fully maintained, but it seemed to him that it was steadily increasing! And presently a breathless messenger arrived from Carlos, begging Jack to

spare the former as many men as he possibly could, to help in driving back a body of Spanish troops who had actually succeeded in forcing a passage across the river! In response to this request Jack of course instantly detached every man he could possibly spare, retaining less than fifty to aid him in defending his own position: but the news which he had just received made it perfectly clear to him that the defence was practically at an end; for if Carlos had been unable to prevent the Spaniards from forcing the passage of the river, it was in the highest degree unlikely that he would be able to stem the rush, much less drive it back. Jack at once began to consider what was the best course to pursue under the new conditions; and, as he thought, a plan began to gradually unfold itself in his mind. The estate, he felt, was lost, for if only a sufficient number of the Spaniards could once get across the river to hold Carlos' force at bay for five minutes, by the end of that time a reinforcement would have crossed strong enough to sweep the defenders out of existence: nothing, therefore, in that case could save the estate from destruction, but it might be possible to visit upon the destroyers a heavy retribution.

Jack's mind was thus occupied when another messenger arrived from Carlos to tell him that all was lost, and that Carlos, with the remnant of his party—with whom were Don Hermoso and his wife—was retreating up the valley, hotly pursued by a strong party of Spanish soldiers; while other Spaniards were in possession of the house and the several outbuildings, which they were obviously preparing to set on fire: and the message concluded by requesting Jack to follow with his party, and join the fugitives, if possible.

Now it happened that Carlos' retreat up the valley chimed in excellently well with the scheme which was beginning to take shape within Jack's brain; the latter therefore lost no time in collecting together his little band of riflemen and leading them through the wood, round by the rear of the house and outbuildings, and along a bush path, to a spot at which he could intercept and join the retreating party, and at which, moreover, owing to the nature of the ground, he believed he could pretty effectually check the pursuit, and cover the retreat of the main body of the defenders. As he pressed forward at the head of his own scanty contingent the sounds of occasional shots told him that Carlos was still maintaining a good running fight: but, as the path which he was following constituted a short cut to the spot which he desired to reach, he soon left those sounds in his rear, and, pressing rapidly forward, at length arrived at the main path; and, aided by the lightning, which was now flashing incessantly, contrived to place his men in ambush behind a number of big boulders that studded the almost perpendicular sides of the bush-clad hill, just as the leading files of the retreating party came into view round a bend of the path.

Jack saw with satisfaction that the retreat was being conducted in good order. First came a body of some fifty well-armed negroes, who were keeping a wary eye about them, to guard against the possibility of being ambuscaded by some portion of the enemy who might have pushed on and got in front of them—although such a thing was scarcely likely to have happened; then came the Señora, in a hammock suspended from a pole borne on the shoulders of two stout negroes, with Don Hermoso and Señor Calderon walking, one on either side of her; and behind these again came the main body of the retreating defenders, with the two Maxim guns in their midst, and with Carlos bringing up the rear in charge of a party of about twenty riflemen, who were covering the retreat by frequently facing round and exchanging shots with the pursuers. As these last came into view, Jack rose from his place of ambush—at the imminent risk of being shot by his friends before they could recognise him—and made the fact of his presence and that of his party known, bidding the others pass on and leave the heaviest of the covering work to him. Their losses, Jack could see, had been terribly heavy, and they looked weary to death with their long hours of fighting: yet he was gratified to observe that, with very few exceptions, the men carried themselves as resolutely as ever, and displayed the effect of his training by taking the fullest advantage of every particle of cover, dodging behind rocks, boulders, trunks of trees, and clumps of bush; taking as careful aim as though they were shooting in a match; re-loading, and then flitting from cover to cover to take up a fresh position.

The rear-guard under Carlos had not passed much more than a hundred yards ahead when the leading files of the pursuers appeared round the bend of the path, breathless, from the fact that the retreating party had no sooner disappeared round the elbow than the Spaniards had broken into a run, taking advantage of the circumstance that they were for a moment out of sight of the enemy to shorten the distance between themselves and the pursued. As the vanguard of some twenty pursuing Spaniards dashed round the bend they dropped on one knee and raised their rifles to their shoulders, availing themselves of the lightning flashes to take aim at the little crowd of retreating figures imperfectly seen here and there through the overhanging and swaying branches.



THE AMBUSCADE

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Chapter Nineteen.

Trapped!

Never for a moment did they suspect the existence of the little body of men concealed among the ferns and undergrowth and boulders, some sixty feet up the precipitous side of the hill round the base of which they were winding, until, before the quickest of them could pull trigger, there rang out above them an irregular volley, aimed with such deadly precision that every man of them went down before it, and were there found, blocking the path, when their comrades arrived upon the scene a minute or two later. As these in turn swung round the bend and came upon the prostrate forms, they naturally halted and proceeded to examine the bodies, with the view of separating the living from the dead; with the result that there was almost instantly a crowd of about a hundred Spanish soldiers bunched together in the narrow path, some of them performing ambulance work, but the majority simply waiting for an opportunity to pass. This was altogether too good a chance to be neglected; and, waiting only until the jostling crowd in the pathway was at its thickest, Jack raised a whistle to his lips and blew a single, shrill note.

The call was instantly answered by a crashing volley from the concealed negroes, which took such murderous effect upon the crowd below that scarcely a dozen men were left upon their feet; and those who were untouched were so utterly demoralised that they incontinently turned tail and retreated upon the main body, shouting: "Back! back! There is an ambush round the bend of the road; and we shall be slaughtered to a man if we go forward!" Whereupon the Spanish officer in charge of the pursuit—who was prudently remaining with the main body, instead of pushing forward with the vanguard—at once halted his men, and proceeded to enquire what all the confusion was about. The truth was that, finding himself on strange ground, following a narrow, winding, bush path, with a deepening ravine on his right, and a precipitously steep hillside on his left, overgrown with ferns and scrub thick enough to give perfect cover to an unlimited number of men; and with a furious thunderstorm raging, which promised to speedily develop into something very considerably worse than what it already was, he had no stomach for continuing the pursuit, and was only too glad of an excuse to call a halt and allow the enemy to go upon his way without further molestation. On the other hand, Jack, having satisfied himself that he had at least checked the pursuit, gave the word to his men to move forward; and, taking a short cut over the spur of the hill, they soon found themselves once more in the path, and close upon the heels of their companions.

As Jack's party presently overtook what had originally been the rear-guard, Carlos dropped into the rear and joined his friend, and the two youths seized the opportunity to effect an exhaustive interchange of news, and to relate to each other the most stirring episodes in the defence of their respective positions. The young Cuban explained the means adopted by the Spaniards to force a passage across the river, and how he had eventually been overpowered and forced to retire; and then Singleton unfolded to Carlos his views upon the subject of how to deal with the enemy, could the latter be induced to follow them to a certain spot up among the hills which Jack described and Carlos remembered.

This spot they were now rapidly approaching. It consisted of a nearly straight defile, about half a mile in length, with a bend in its middle just sufficient to shut out the view of one end of it from the other. This defile was simply a cleft in the stupendous mass of rock that formed a great spur of the mountain on the left-hand side of the path, and was undoubtedly the result of some terrific natural convulsion of prehistoric times, which had rent the living rock asunder, leaving a vertical wall on either side, the indentations in the one wall accurately corresponding to the projections on the other. At the lower extremity—that is to say, the extremity which the fugitives were now approaching—access to the defile was gained by means of a sort of portal, less than six feet wide, the space between the rock walls thence

narrowing gradually to about four feet, and thus forming a kind of passage about fifty feet long; beyond which the rock walls gradually receded from each other until, at the other extremity of it, the defile was nearly a hundred feet wide. The walls were unscalable throughout the entire length of the defile, which abruptly ended in a rough and torn rock face some two hundred feet in height. This rock face could scarcely be described as unscalable, because it was so rough that, although practically vertical, the projections on it were so numerous and pronounced that an active man could climb it without much difficulty, if uninterfered with; but if the summit and flanks happened to be held by even a small force of men armed with rifles, to climb it would at once become an absolute impossibility. Outside the entrance there was a small, open, grassy space, backed by dense scrub; and Jack's plan was that Carlos, with about fifty men, should enter the defile, pass through it to its upper extremity and scale the rock face there, holding it against the Spaniards, and thus checking their further advance, while Jack, and the remainder of the negroes, with the two Maxims, should secrete themselves in the scrub and remain in hiding until the entire Spanish force had passed into the defile, when they would emerge and block the entrance with the two Maxims, thus bottling up the Spaniards and compelling them to surrender—or be annihilated.

By the time that Singleton had completely unfolded his plans to Carlos, the vanguard of the fugitives had reached the entrance to the defile, where they halted, awaiting further instructions; whereupon Carlos ran forward and, picking his fifty men, led them through the portal, while Jack, taking command of the remainder, caused them to carefully drag and lift the two Maxims into concealment, obliterate all trace of the passage of the guns into the scrub, and afterwards conceal themselves therein—the Señora, Don Hermoso, and Señor Calderon remaining with the party. They had scarcely hidden themselves, and removed all signs of their presence to Jack's satisfaction, when the storm which had been threatening for so long a time burst with terrific fury, the air being continuously aglimmer with the flickering and quivering of lightning flashes, while the very ground beneath their feet seemed to quake with the deafening, soul-shaking crash of the thunder; and the rain, breaking loose at last, descended in such cataractal volumes that, even partially sheltered as most of them were by the dense foliage of the scrub amid which they cowered, every soul of them was wet to the skin in less than a minute. And in the midst of it all, Jack, peering out from his hiding-place a few feet from the path, saw the wretched Spanish soldiery go splashing and squelching past, too wet, and altogether too utterly tired and miserable apparently, to take any notice of where they were going, and seemingly anxious only to press forward in the hope of somewhere finding shelter.

There were about six hundred of them; and by the time that they had all passed into the defile the storm had nearly spent itself. The rain had ceased, the lightning flickered only occasionally, and then low down toward the horizon; the thunder had dwindled to a low, hollow, muffled rumbling, and the clouds overhead had broken up and were drifting fast away, revealing a nearly full moon sailing high overhead, in the strong, silvery light of which the saturated vegetation glittered.

As the last Spaniard disappeared within the portal, Singleton cautiously emerged from his hiding-place, and, forcing his way through the sodden herbage, peered round the angle of the rock, watching the movements of the retiring foe. He waited patiently until the rearmost files had penetrated a good hundred yards up the defile, and then he raised his hand, waving it as a signal for his men to come forth. The next instant the place was alive with men. Fifty willing hands dragged forth the Maxims and planted them fair and square in the portal, pointing up the ravine, the ammunition boxes were opened and bands of cartridges placed in position: rifles were loaded; and ere the last of the Spaniards had passed round the bend and out of sight every preparation to give them a warm reception upon their return was complete.

The watchers by the portal had not very long to wait. The enemy were not out of sight much more than ten minutes when a solitary rifle shot cracked out at the head of the defile and came echoing down its rocky sides; then another one; then three or four more; until at length a brisk fusillade was proceeding, accompanied by a good deal of confused shouting. This lasted for the best part of an hour, when there came first a lull in the firing, and then the sound of many approaching feet, following which a disorderly crowd of Spanish soldiers appeared doubling down the defile, in full flight toward the entrance.

With the appearance of the first of them Jack sprang up on a boulder, and shouted to them to halt; but so eager were the Spaniards to escape from the punishment that had been inflicted upon them at the other end of the defile that it was not until one of the Maxims opened fire upon them that they could be persuaded to stay their precipitate flight. But the sharp, thudding, hammer-like reports of the machine-gun, and the stream of lead that began to play upon them and thin their ranks, soon brought them to a halt, when, flinging down their arms, they cried for quarter, which of course was at once given them. Then, Carlos' party closing in upon them from the rear, the Spaniards were carefully disarmed, their ammunition taken away from them, and their weapons destroyed by being consumed in a huge bonfire, formed of dry wood collected from the depths of the bush. And while this regrettable but necessary act of destruction was in process of execution, Carlos and Jack went among the prisoners, questioning them as to their number, who was in command, upon what principle they were working, and so on. Unfortunately they were unable to extract very much information, for it appeared that every officer had perished, either in the attack upon the estate, or at the far end of the defile: while the soldiers seemed either too stupid or too ill-informed to be able to give trustworthy replies to any of the questions asked, except that General Weyler had gone back to Havana, and that the operations in the province of Pinar del Rio were being conducted by Generals Bernal and Arolas, who, by strict command of Weyler, were laying the entire country waste, destroying every building of whatsoever description, churches included, on the ground that they afforded possible places of refuge or shelter for revolutionaries; mercilessly shooting down every man, woman, and child found, on the plea that, not having obeyed General Weyler's concentration order, they were contumacious rebels: that, in short, where this host went they found smiling prosperity, and left behind them a blood-stained, fire-blackened waste. The troops were not acting in concert, or as one body, but in independent detachments, to each of which was allotted the duty of covering a strip of country of a certain width, which strip it was their task to ravage from end to end. The detachment to which the duty of destroying Don Hermoso's property had fallen had consisted of some three thousand infantry, a troop of cavalry, and a battery of field artillery; and according to the story of the prisoners it had suffered frightfully during the attack, the officer in command having wasted his men most recklessly in his determination to conquer at any cost—indeed, if

they were to be believed, with the exception of about half a squadron of cavalry, a few artillerymen, and perhaps fifty men left behind to destroy the buildings, they were the sole survivors of the attack and the pursuit.

The question which now presented itself to Jack and Carlos was: What were they to do with their prisoners, now that they had them?—for that they were a distinctly embarrassing possession was an indisputable fact. In the first place, the unfortunate wretches were by this time suffering acutely from hunger and thirst, but their captors had neither food nor drink to give them; indeed, they had none wherewith to satisfy their own pressing needs. Also, since all the buildings on the estate were doubtless by this time utterly destroyed by fire, there was no place in which to confine them; yet it would obviously be the height of folly to set them free while their comrades were still in the neighbourhood, for that would only mean that they would bring back those comrades to complete the work which they themselves had failed to finish. At length, after a long and anxious consultation, it was agreed that the only possible course was to pen the Spaniards inside the defile, keeping them there by the wholesome dread inspired by the presence of the two Maxims and a strong band of armed men holding the portal, under Carlos' command; that Jack, with a picked body of fifty armed negroes, should escort Don Hermoso and the Señora back to the house, in the hope that, somewhere among the ruins, at least a partial shelter might be found for the unhappy lady, who, drenched to the skin, was now threatened with a serious attack of fever; and that, after a shelter had been found for her, Jack and his men should reconnoitre the camp of the enemy and endeavour to learn something of their immediate intentions.

This having been arranged, the prisoners were given to understand that they must make themselves as comfortable as they could where they were, for the present, and that any attempt on their part to break out would be visited with immediate and rigorous punishment: after which Jack and his party, accompanied by Don Hermoso and his wife, briskly stepped out on their way down the valley, along the road by which they had so recently come, emerging, about an hour later, into the open space that had been occupied by the warehouses. Some of these, as well as the whole of the negro huts, were found to be nothing but a heap of black and smouldering ruins; while others had been set on fire, but the flames had obviously been extinguished by the pelting rain that had fallen during the latter part of the recent thunderstorm. Those buildings which had happened to contain large quantities of combustible goods had naturally suffered most severely, and were now merely a collection of roofless, smoke-blackened walls; while those which had been empty had suffered comparatively little damage—indeed, in one or two cases, practically none at all, except that the doors had been broken open and partly wrenched off their hinges. One of these was at once utilised as a shelter for Don Hermoso's wife; and, while the negroes mounted guard round the building, the Don and Jack hurried away toward the house, to ascertain its condition, and, so far as the former was concerned, to endeavour to find a change of clothing for the Señora.

At the first glimpse, the house, when they reached it, appeared to have suffered very severely, for many of the windows were broken, and the once immaculately white walls were streaked and blackened here and there by fire and smoke: and when they entered the building, everything was found in a most shocking state of confusion; the furniture was overturned and much of it was broken, a great deal of it was irretrievably damaged by fire, great holes had been burnt here and there in the flooring, cupboards and bureaux had been broken open and their contents scattered, apparently in a search for money or valuables; many small articles of value were missing, pictures were slashed and torn, poor Doña Isolda's grand piano had but one leg left and was otherwise a complete wreck, and some priceless china vases and bowls that had been the glory of the drawing-room were lying on the floor, shivered to atoms. But a little closer inspection revealed that while an immense amount of damage had been done—much of it through pure wantonness and lust for destruction—the building itself was practically intact, the roof was still weatherproof, and some of the rooms were in quite inhabitable condition; while there were many articles of furniture and dress, as well as many utensils of various kinds, that could still be made serviceable. Among the inhabitable rooms were the bedroom used by Don Hermoso and his wife, as also those usually occupied by Carlos and Jack; indeed, it appeared as though the spoilers had confined their destructive efforts almost entirely to the front part of the house. Under these circumstances, as there were no signs of the enemy in the immediate neighbourhood, Don Hermoso lost no time in hurrying back to his wife and getting her up to the house and into bed, that being all he could do at the moment to combat the fever which had seized upon her.

This much having been accomplished, Jack set his negroes to search among the wreckage for anything in the nature of food which might perchance have escaped destruction, while he, single-handed, set off to reconnoitre the camp of the enemy, out on the plain. His shortest route thereto was by way of the position which Carlos had so resolutely defended; and he chose this because, the enemy having forced the passage of the river at this spot, he believed he would there find the means of crossing most easily himself. He had scarcely traversed a hundred yards from the house ere he began to encounter evidences of the severity of the fight that had waged throughout the afternoon and evening of that disastrously eventful day, in the shape of dead and wounded men, the former lying stark and cold in the light of the moon, some of them with limbs disposed as though they merely slumbered, while the contorted bodies of others showed that they had passed away in the throes of mortal agony; some with eyes decently closed, others with their sightless eyeballs upturned until only the whites were visible: while from the lips of the wounded there issued one low, continuous moan of: "Water—water! For the love of God, water!" It was a pitiable sight beyond all human power of description, and as Jack looked round him and beheld those units of slain and tortured humanity a great and righteous anger took possession of him against the arrogant Power that had been the cause of all this anguish and misery—to say nothing of what was enacting elsewhere—rather than surrender its grip upon the fair island that it had neither the will nor the ability to wisely govern—the Power that had deliberately entered upon a vindictive war against those whom it had goaded to rebellion.

It was of course quite impossible for him, unaided, to ameliorate appreciably a hundredth part of the physical anguish of the men who lay there writhing and groaning on the sodden ground; but there was one poor wretch who managed to attract his attention—a Spanish soldier who, the lower part of his body paralysed, supported himself upon one hand while he mutely pointed with the other to his open mouth and protruding tongue, and who seemed to be the very living embodiment of torturing thirst. The mute appeal in this poor creature's eyes was so movingly eloquent that the young Englishman simply could not pass on and callously leave him in his torment. He therefore stooped

and, laying the man's arms over his shoulders, lifted the poor fellow on to his back and carried him a little way to where a depression in the ground had been converted by the rain into a pool some three or four yards in diameter, from which several wounded men were already slaking their fiery thirst; and there he laid him down within reach of the precious liquid, and stood for a moment to watch the poor creature suck down great draughts of the thick, muddy water!

There were scores of other unfortunates in sight whose sufferings were probably as acute as those of the poor wretch whom Jack had just helped, and who had an equally strong claim upon his compassion, but stern necessity demanded that he should neglect them in favour of the mission which he had set out to execute; also, he recognised that his first duty was to secure the safety of his friends. He therefore perforce steeled his heart, and pushed on toward the point at which the Spaniards had effected the passage of the river, and where he consequently expected to find the means of getting across. It was a gruesome journey, if a short one, for every yard that he advanced the dead and wounded lay more thickly piled together, until at length, by the margin of the river, the prostrate bodies of friend and foe were so closely intermingled that he found it difficult to progress at all without trampling them under foot, while the now still night air positively reeked with the odour of blood! It was awful beyond the utmost that the young Englishman's imagination had ever pictured, and as he glanced about him with shrinking gaze and rising gorge he again mentally execrated the leader to whose savagery all those unspeakable horrors were due.

But now at last he was at the river, and now also he saw by what means the Spaniards had finally succeeded in accomplishing the task of forcing the passage of the barrier. A single glance at the contrivance was sufficient to prove that the assailants possessed among them at least one skilled engineer, for spanning the stream Jack saw an extraordinarily light yet strong bridge, constructed entirely of bamboos so lashed and braced together as to be capable of sustaining the weight of a continuous column of men, two abreast, over its entire length. It was fashioned upon the principle of the bowstring girder, and was considerably longer than was actually needed—which Jack accounted for by the fact that the Spaniards had been allowed no opportunity to gauge the actual width of the river, and had therefore been obliged to guess at it; yet, so light did it appear to be that he believed thirty men might easily have handled and placed it in position. He quickly passed across it, finding it perfectly firm to the tread, and then set out to cross the open plain toward the distant camp. He had still his night glasses with him, and as he went he frequently made use of them, as much to avoid the risk of being detected by the sentries as to observe what was passing in the camp; but from the outset he failed to detect the presence of any sentries whatever, and gradually it began to dawn upon him that the occupants of the camp, believing the defenders of the estate to be not only absolutely and irretrievably beaten, but also in panic-stricken flight, had not deemed it necessary to post any sentries at all, and were all sleeping in fancied perfect security. And this in fact he found to be actually the case, when at length, with the observance of every possible precaution, he actually stood within the precincts of the camp and looked about him. There was not a light in any one of the many tents round him; the watch fires had burnt low, and in some cases had died out altogether; not a soul was moving from one end of the camp to the other, and all round him were sleeping men! He waited only long enough to assure himself that this was actually the case, and then, withdrawing as carefully as he had come, he hurried back to where he had left his fifty men resting in one of the least damaged of the warehouses, and roused them with the intimation that they were required for instant action. Then, briefly acquainting them with what he had done and what he proposed to do, and ordering them to load their weapons, he marched them out across the bamboo bridge on to the plain, where he bade them take open order and, crouching low on the grass, advance upon the camp, exposing themselves as little as possible, since should but one person in the camp awake and detect them, all this labour would be lost.

It took the little band of adventurers a full hour to accomplish the passage across the plain; and when at length they arrived within about fifty yards of the camp, Jack caused the signal to be passed along the line for all hands to lie prone in the grass, while he went forward alone to satisfy himself that everything was still as he had left it. Then, as he had done some two hours previously, Jack crawled right into the heart of the camp and gazed carefully about him. Everything was still perfectly quiet, save that from certain of the tents there issued sounds advertising the fact that there were noisy sleepers within. Then Singleton rose cautiously to his feet and lifted his right hand above his head. The next minute fifty armed negroes, under his whispered directions, were moving about the camp, silent-footed as cats, collecting the piled arms and every other weapon which they could find, and concealing them among the long grass at a safe distance from the camp. Then, this done, Jack raised his revolver above his head and fired a single shot into the air; at the sound of which the startled occupants of the tents came tumbling out, one over another, to learn what the disturbance was about, and to seize their weapons. But, instead of their piled arms, their eyes fell upon fifty stalwart negroes facing them with levelled rifles, and Jack beside them with a revolver in each hand.

Such an unexpected sight naturally caused the Spaniards to pause in their rush, of which circumstance Singleton took advantage to thrust one of his revolvers back into his belt, and then raise his hand, with a command for silence. The Spaniards, their eyes still heavy with sleep, and disconcerted by the discovery that every one of their weapons had mysteriously vanished, obeyed readily enough, whereupon Jack requested the officer in command to step forward.

A barefooted man, in shirt and trousers only, and carrying in his hand the sheathed sword of a Spanish infantry captain, which he had evidently snatched from his tent pole as he sprang from his camp bed, stepped forward, and, announcing himself as the senior surviving officer, demanded to know who Jack was, and what he wanted.

"I am," said Jack, "the commander of a body of negroes, of whom you see a detachment before you. We are in arms against Spain, as are thousands more of the inhabitants of this island, because we very strongly object to the cruel tyranny and oppression with which we have been governed, and demand our freedom. Your march through the country has been marked by violence and outrage of every conceivable description, and you have left in your track nothing but death and desolation. The measure of your iniquity is full, and Cuba will endure no more. Your General Weyler has declared a war of extermination against Cubans, and you who execute his murderous mandate must pay the penalty. Yet, since it would be manifestly unfair to punish the innocent for the guilty, and since I am convinced that many of you have only obeyed your general's orders most unwillingly, I will spare those of you who will surrender, and execute only those who, by refusing, exhibit a readiness to persist in their iniquitous deeds. And do

not look for any help from your comrades yonder; they triumphed temporarily, achieving a victory by sheer force of numbers, but since you and they parted company they have fallen into a trap—and now those who still live are prisoners. Will you join them; or will you go the way of those others who have to-night laid down their lives at the behest of a man who knows not the meaning of mercy? Let those among you who are willing to surrender throw up their hands." The officer turned and looked behind him: every man under his command had thrown his hands above his head! It was enough; his humiliation was complete. Drawing his sword from its scabbard, he placed the point on the ground; then, bending the blade into the form of a bow, he gave the hilt a sudden, peculiar thrusting jerk, and the blade snapped in twain. Then, tossing the hilt from him, he exclaimed, in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "I surrender!" and burst into tears of anger and mortification.

Chapter Twenty.

The end of the struggle.

The prisoners, about a hundred in number, many of whom were less than half-dressed, were now allowed five minutes wherein to retire to their tents and assume their clothing; after which they were formed up four deep, and marched off in the direction from which Jack and his party had come, a young, swift-footed negro having been dispatched on ahead with a note from Singleton for Carlos, informing the latter of the capture of the camp and its occupants, and suggesting that he should bring his prisoners down to the compound adjoining the warehouses.

With the arrival of the prisoners and their armed escort within half a mile of the spot where the bamboo bridge crossed the river, they began to come upon the first evidences of the recent fight, in the shape, first, of widely scattered units, and then of little groups of two or three dead or wounded. The first they were obliged to leave, for the moment; but the wounded were, by Jack's orders, now sought for and succoured, so far as succour was possible by unskilled hands, by being, in the first instance, borne closer to the river, and having their fiery thirst temporarily assuaged, and, later on, by having their wounds dressed, so far as the conveniences available permitted. With so large a number of wounded, this labour of mercy necessarily occupied a considerable amount of time, so that it was broad daylight when at length Jack conducted his prisoners into the compound and marched them into an empty and partially ruined storehouse which Carlos had already caused to be prepared for their reception, the prisoners which the young Cuban had brought down from the defile having already been lodged in an adjoining building. Then came the question of feeding the hungry—a very formidable task, considering that practically all the food on the estate had been destroyed by fire on the preceding night. This difficulty, however, was overcome by Jack revisiting the captured camp with a party of a dozen of the least exhausted negroes, and collecting a wagon-load of foodstuffs which, with half a dozen oxen, they drove on to the estate by way of the lowered drawbridge. Then, with infinite labour, the wounded were once more sought out, and carried into one of the storehouses which had suffered least from the fire, where they were attended to, so far as they could be, by a band of their compatriots who had volunteered for the service, and who had given their parole that they would not again take up arms against the Cubans. And next came the terrible task of burying the dead, which was also done, under Jack's supervision, by the prisoners, kept in a proper state of submission by a strong guard of armed negroes. It was by this time considerably past mid-day: at least half of the negroes, who had fought so stubbornly and well in defence of the estate, had had an opportunity to snatch a few hours' sleep, and were consequently in a condition to again mount guard over the prisoners; and then, and only then, did Jack and Carlos retire to their rooms, and flinging themselves, still dressed, upon their beds, sink at once into absolute oblivion.

The two young men were aroused about nine o'clock that night to partake of food, when they learned that Don Hermoso had taken over the direction of affairs; also, that the wounded were for the most part doing well, having been taken in hand by a Spanish surgeon who, himself one of the wounded, had been brought in from the field of battle, and, having been attended to by Mamá Faquita, was now sufficiently recovered to be able to do duty. This was a quite unexpected bit of good news for the two young men; but there was bad news also for them, in the fact that the unfortunate Señora Montijo was in a state of such high fever that the Spanish doctor was deeply concerned as to her condition, which became still more critical as the night wore on.

Before again retiring to rest, Jack "went the rounds", as he expressed it, and saw for himself that everything was satisfactory; and he did the same the first thing upon rising the next morning. Then he, Don Hermoso, and Carlos held a consultation as to how the prisoners were to be disposed of, the difficulty of feeding and controlling so large a number being one that was likely to grow daily: and it was finally decided that, as the rest of the army had by this time passed on, and were scarcely likely to return over the same ground, the sound prisoners, together with those of the wounded who were so slightly hurt as to be able to travel, should be set at liberty and escorted for some few miles on the road to Pinar del Rio by a strong band of armed negroes, whose duty it would be to see that the released men did not attempt to rejoin the main army; that as soon as those were disposed of, the estate—which was practically destroyed, and therefore could not very well be further injured—should be abandoned to the Spanish doctor and such assistants as he could persuade to remain with him to look after the wounded; and that, as soon as the Señora's health would permit, Don Hermoso, Carlos, and Jack should attach themselves to one of the guerrilla bands who were hanging upon the skirts of the main Spanish army and harassing it night and day. The only difficulty in the way of this programme was the question of what to do with the Señora; but this was disposed of by a suggestion from Jack that the lady should be conveyed to the Laguna de Cortes, where the *Thetis* was due to arrive in about a fortnight, and be put on board the yacht.

Then Jack undertook to see to the release of the unhurt prisoners, with all the business incidental thereto; and, as a first step, he proceeded with a band of fifty armed negroes to the captured camp, and forthwith went to work to bring in all the weapons and ammunition, the uninjured field gun, the tents, and the wagons, all of which would be exceedingly valuable acquisitions to any revolutionary force which they might chance to join. Then the horses, mules, and cattle were driven in, the mules being harnessed to the gun and the wagons. All these captures having been stored as carefully as circumstances permitted, the prisoners who were to be released were paraded, and each was

served with one day's rations; then they gladly moved off, *en route* for Pinar del Rio, under a strong escort of armed negroes, led by Jack, who was on this occasion mounted upon a good horse. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon when the little army started; and they marched until eight o'clock, when they camped for the night in the open, Jack and his band returning some three miles along the road by which they had gone, and passing the night in a wood through which the road ran. They arrived back at the estate shortly after nine o'clock the next morning, and Jack then learned, to his profound sorrow, that the unfortunate Señora Montijo had passed away during the night, another victim of Spanish tyranny and oppression. They buried the poor lady on the evening of that day, in a particularly lovely and peaceful spot, some distance up the valley, which had been a favourite resort of her daughter. The ceremony was singularly moving and impressive, every negro on the place following the body to the grave, and Don Hermoso himself, in the absence of a priest, reading the funeral service over his departed wife. But although the loss of the lady was deeply felt by all, there can be little doubt that, all things considered, her death was a fortunate circumstance, not only for herself, but also for all those who most dearly loved her; for it was only too clear that her reason had been permanently lost. Twenty-four hours later what had been the finest and best-kept tobacco-growing estate on the island was abandoned to the Spanish doctor and his patients—with a staff of volunteer assistants from the unwounded Spanish prisoners to look after them. The Montijos, father and son, with Jack, and as many of the negro defenders as still survived, had taken to the mountains, carrying off with them the field gun, Maxims, rifles, ammunition, and stores of all descriptions, either originally belonging to them, or taken from the enemy; and a very formidable force they soon proved themselves to be.

About a month later news came to the band that Antonio Maceo, having evaded the Spanish army in the province of Pinar del Rio, and got on the other side of Weyler's *trocha*, had been killed in a skirmish not far from Havana, which city he had proposed to threaten, with the object of causing the withdrawal of the Spanish troops from the western end of the island. This news, which proved to be true, was a very heavy blow to the revolutionaries, who regarded Antonio as far and away their most capable and energetic leader; and soon afterward they sustained a further very serious loss, in the person of Rius Rivera, who had arrived in Pinar del Rio to take the place of Maceo, but who, in the month of March, 1897, was wounded in a skirmish near San Cristobal, being afterwards captured and deported. Nor was this all; for about the same time Layas, another very prominent and effective revolutionary leader, was killed in a fight in the province of Havana. Yet, serious as those misfortunes were deemed to be, they did not discourage the revolutionaries; on the contrary, they but spurred the latter to more strenuous efforts, and the brief, and often fragmentary, items of intelligence which filtered through to them from time to time concerning the incessant harrying of the Spaniards by Don Hermoso and his active band of guerrillas were cheering as cordial to them, stimulating them to emulative feats of daring and enterprise which rapidly reduced Weyler to the very verge of despair.

Meanwhile the course of events in Cuba was being very keenly watched in the United States, and was steadily increasing the already dangerous tension which had been gradually growing between that country and Spain; and this was further increased by the occurrence of the Rius incident. Rius, it may be mentioned, was a Cuban, who, like many other natives of the same island, had resided in the United States, and had deemed it good policy to secure naturalisation papers as an American, after which he had returned to Cuba. The Spanish authorities—who may or may not have had good reason—suspected Rius of being a dangerous person, and arrested him; whereupon the United States Consul, ever watchful of the rights of American citizens, promptly demanded that the man should be immediately brought to trial, and released if no offence could be proved against him. The machinery of diplomacy is sometimes apt to move a trifle slowly, and ere it had moved far enough to bring about the satisfaction of the Consul's demands it was stated that Rius had died suddenly in prison. This put General Fitzhugh Lee upon his mettle: he very strongly suspected that there was more in this man's death than met the eye, and he insisted upon having the body medically examined, with the result that Rius was found to have been killed by a blow on the back of the head; while, scratched by a nail on the back of a chair in his cell, was found a statement to the effect that he was certain the prison authorities were fully determined to murder him. These ugly facts the United States Consul promptly reported to Washington, with the result that the American President immediately ordered him to demand a full investigation of all the circumstances, promising to back him up in his demand with all necessary support. As a result of this, the Spanish authorities, after interposing every possible obstacle in the way, appointed a commission of enquiry; but, as no clear proof was adduced that Rius had actually been deliberately murdered, the incident was permitted to close. There is little doubt, however, that this was the last drop in the cup, and that from that moment the United States practically determined to intervene upon the first legitimate opportunity, unless, indeed, Spain could be persuaded to grant to Cuba something in the nature of a very liberal measure of self-government. To secure this the United States Government approached Madrid with certain proposals; and this action, combined with a change in the Spanish Ministry, resulted in the recall of General Weyler, and the appointment of General Blanco as Capitan-General in his stead.

General Blanco arrived in Cuba in the month of November, 1897, charged with the task of pacifying the Cubans by a policy of conciliation, instead of the policy of coercion so vigorously and mercilessly pursued by his predecessor. But conciliation as a policy was adopted by Spain altogether too late to save Cuba to her. Had it been tried two years earlier, and pursued in good faith, it is more than likely that the Cubans, as a whole, would have gladly welcomed it, and that the revolution would have subsided and died out for want of support and encouragement: but now the island bore everywhere the marks of Weyler's destroying hand; its once flourishing industries were gone; its inhabitants were ruined, and those of them who had been concentrated in the fortified towns were dying by thousands, perishing of starvation as the result of gross, culpable mismanagement, if not callous indifference; and the Cubans were firmly resolved never again to submit to a Government capable of such shocking abuses. Their experience of the last two years had convinced them that they had now but to persevere and they could compel Spain to evacuate the island in the course of another year at the utmost; while now, so incensed was the United States with Spain that its intervention might come at any moment. They therefore received General Blanco's conciliatory advances coldly, and, so far from surrendering or laying down their arms, pursued their operations with even intensified energy. Meanwhile, on January 1, 1898, the new Constitution, which was one of Spain's conciliatory measures, was proclaimed as in force, and a Colonial Government was appointed, with Señor Galvin as its nominal leader; but it possessed very little power, since so long as Spain persisted in retaining its hold on Cuba, and the revolution continued, the question of governing the island was necessarily a military one. Then, to add still further to

the difficulties of Spain, and to bring the tension between her and the United States to practically breaking-point, came the "Dupuy de Lome" and the "Lee" incidents. The first of these arose out of a letter written by Señor Dupuy de Lome, the Spanish Minister at Washington, to his friend Señor Canalejas, who was then in Cuba on a visit. In this letter Señor Dupuy de Lome was imprudent enough to express, in very emphatic language, his doubts as to the good faith of the United States in the attitude which it had taken up on the Cuban question; and, not satisfied with this signal act of imprudence, the writer must needs indulge in certain very insulting remarks respecting President McKinley. This letter was stolen from Señor Canalejas in Havana, and sold to a New York newspaper, which promptly published it, with the natural result that de Lome was compelled to resign his post. The second, or "Lee", incident was a sequel to the first, and was doubtless prompted by a desire for revenge. It was nothing less than a request by Spain that General Lee should be recalled from his position as Consul-General for the United States at Havana, upon the ground that he was a *persona non grata* to the Spanish authorities there. Needless to say, the request was not complied with. And then, finally, came the *Maine* incident.

This last had its origin in certain serious military riots which occurred in Havana on the 12th and 13th of January, 1898, due to the opposition of the Spaniards, military and civil, to General Blanco in his character as pacificator; the pacification of the island otherwise than by military operations being very unpopular with the resident Spaniards, and especially with the army. In consequence of these riots, and in view of the danger to American citizens arising out of the disorderly state generally of the city, the battleship *Maine* was sent to Havana by the United States Government.

She arrived in Havana harbour at eleven o'clock in the forenoon of January 25, 1898, and was duly saluted by the forts and the Spanish ships of war, whose salutes she as duly returned; after which, under the direction of the port authorities, she was moored in the man-o'-war anchorage. Nothing that could, even by the most hypersensitive, be construed into an act of discourteous behaviour was shown to either the officers or men of the ship; on the contrary, the Spaniards, no doubt shrewdly suspecting that the eye of the United States, quickened by recent events to a state of preternaturally acute perception, was suspiciously watching their every action, were at the greatest pains to exhibit the utmost courtesy, not only official but also non-official, to their visitors, to whom the officials and residents alike extended the most generous hospitality, in return for which several receptions were held on board the ship by Captain Sigsbee and his officers.

Now it happened that on February 15th—which fell on a Tuesday—Don Hermoso Montijo, his son Carlos, and Jack Singleton, completely worn out by many months of campaigning among the mountains, and several sharp attacks of fever, having amalgamated their considerably augmented band with that of another insurgent leader, and turned the command over to him, succeeded in entering the city of Havana unrecognised, and made their way on board the *Thetis*—which had then been for some time lying idle in the harbour—with the intention of recruiting their health by running across the Atlantic for the purpose of procuring a further supply of arms and ammunition, which the continual accessions to the revolutionary ranks caused to be most urgently needed. They were most enthusiastically welcomed by Milsom, who, having heard nothing from any of them for more than three months, was beginning very seriously to fear that, like many others of the revolutionaries, they had been "wiped out" in one or another of the countless skirmishes that were constantly occurring with the Spanish troops. He was delighted to learn that they were all to make a run across the Atlantic and back together; and within an hour of their arrival on board set to work upon the necessary preparations for the trip, which, however, he explained, it would be scarcely possible to complete under a couple of days, in the then disordered state of the city, with its attendant disorganised business conditions.

But, great as Milsom's pleasure at their appearance undoubtedly was, Singleton soon became aware of a certain subtle constraint and uneasiness in his friend's manner toward him; and as soon as he had satisfied himself that it really existed, and was not the result of his own imagination, he taxed his friend with it.

"Look here, Phil," he said, "there is something wrong somewhere; I can see it by your manner. What is it? Out with it, man! You will have to tell us sooner or later, you know, so you may as well let us know what it is at once. Have you got into collision with the authorities, or roused their suspicions in any way, or what is it? We may as well know first as last, old man; so get it off your mind!"

"So you have noticed it, have you?" responded Milsom, rather grimly. "Well, you have guessed rightly, Jack; there is something very seriously wrong, though not in the directions which you have suggested. Of course the authorities have their suspicions—and very strong ones, too, I don't doubt—about this vessel; they would be fools if they had not, seeing the length of time that she has been hanging about in these waters. But whatever their suspicions may be, they cannot possess an atom of proof, or they would have seized the craft before now, and clapped all hands of us into prison. No, it is not that, but—Jack—I don't know what you will say, or what you will think of me—I give you my word of honour that it was not through any carelessness on my part—but—well, the fact of the matter is that—your submarine has been stolen!"

"The submarine stolen!" echoed Jack. "Nonsense, man; you surely cannot mean it!"

"By Jove, I do, then, and that is a fact!" answered Milsom. "Just exactly when she went, or how she went, I know no more than you do; but we missed her a fortnight ago. As you know, it has been our custom to keep about a foot of water in the boat which concealed the submarine, to keep her bottom tight; and, as you may also remember, that water was changed once a week—namely, every Saturday morning. Well, a fortnight ago last Saturday, when the canvas cover was taken off the boat in order to change the water in her, she was found to be empty; the submarine was gone! Who took her, or by what means it became possible to steal her without a single soul being a penny the wiser, I cannot tell you, and I do not believe we shall ever know; for, of course, when I came to question the crew, there was not a man who was not willing to swear that he had never closed his eyes for an instant while keeping an anchor watch, though, of course, something of the kind must have happened. I suspect the custom-house officers that the authorities have insisted on keeping aboard us all the time that we have been in harbour; but of course I have not said a word to them about it. I have, however, watched them continually, and by their smug looks of satisfaction I am inclined to believe that they know something about it. And ever since then I have been on the prowl everywhere to see if I could find any trace of the boat, but without success."

"Well, old chap," said Jack, "I am exceedingly sorry to hear this; for in unscrupulous hands that submarine may work a terrific amount of mischief, and everything connected with the working of her is so simple that any ordinarily skilful mechanic could easily puzzle it all out with a little study. Moreover, if she has fallen into the hands of the Spaniards—as I suppose she has—they will have no difficulty in accounting for the mysterious disablement of their ships here on the occasion of the *James B. Potter* incident, and it will make them so watchful that henceforth we shall be able to do absolutely nothing. But I do not blame you, Phil: you could not be expected to know that these fellows had somehow discovered the existence of the boat; nor could you be expected to watch her night and day. Her loss is a very serious misfortune, of course, but I am convinced that it is not through any carelessness of yours that it happened."

"Thanks, Jack, for saying that!" answered Milsom; "I did not quite think you would blame me for it: but I cannot help blaming myself to a certain extent; I ought to have been more watchful. Yet how was one to know that the existence of the boat had been discovered? She was guarded night and day, in an unobtrusive way, it is true, and in such a fashion that I believed it quite impossible for anyone to become aware of her existence. Well, she is gone, and we must manage henceforth as best we can without her—unless we can discover her whereabouts and recover possession of her. And now, to change the subject, what do you propose to do with yourselves this afternoon? The Americans are holding a reception aboard the *Maine*. I suppose you wouldn't care to go?"

"I think not," said Jack; "it would be rather too risky. I have come face to face with many Spanish officers during the time that I have been out with the revolutionaries; and if I were perchance to run up against one of them on board that ship it might be awkward. No; I think that the safest plan for Don Hermoso, Carlos, and myself will be to remain quietly aboard here now, and not attempt to leave the yacht again so long as she remains in Cuban waters."

And upon this opinion the trio acted, remaining below all the afternoon, and not venturing on deck at all until after darkness had fallen.

Dinner was over on board the *Thetis*, and the three occupants of the saloon, with Milsom, had adjourned to the top of the deck-house to smoke their post-prandial cigars and enjoy the welcome coolness of the night air. The former were entertaining Milsom by relating to him a few of their recent adventures while operating against the Spanish troops when, just as three bells (half-past nine o'clock) was chiming out from the ships in the harbour, a violent concussion was felt by everybody on board the yacht, and simultaneously their ears were deafened by the sound of a terrific explosion. For a space of perhaps two or three seconds following this a dead silence prevailed, and then from the ships afloat and the streets and quays ashore there arose a low murmur, instantly changing to a confused clamour of hurrying feet and shouting voices, expressive of the utmost panic and dismay, which became a perfect uproar when, as everybody involuntarily turned toward the spot from which the explosion had seemed to proceed, it was seen that the American warship *Maine* was sinking rapidly by the head, while the after part of her was enveloped in flames. And as everybody stared in paralysed horror at the terrible sight, other explosions, though of a much less violent character, were heard on board her! For a second or two astonishment and dismay seemed to have robbed everybody of all power of coherent thought or action; then Milsom started to his feet and shouted in a voice that rang from end to end of the ship:

"Out boats! Each boat her own crew, and no more; you will want every inch of room you can spare for those poor fellows who are struggling for their lives yonder. Hurry, lads, lively now; every second is worth a man's life, remember, for the harbour swarms with sharks! Ah, here you are, Macintyre—come along with me! Is there steam enough in the steamboat's boiler to move her? Good! Then we will try her. I want two more hands. Will you come, Jack, and Carlos?"

Of course they would; and in little more than a minute from the first explosion the boats of the *Thetis* were tearing up the waters of the harbour in a mad race for the honour of being first in the noble work of rescue! And as they went they were joined by boats from the other ships in the harbour, among which were those of the Spanish cruiser *Alfonso the Twelfth*; as well as a large number which put off from the shore. As the boats went hither and thither, seeking for survivors—and finding remarkably few, considering that the complement of the *Maine* amounted to three hundred and forty-seven—an officer in one of the Spanish boats came dashing up, and, with a great show of authority, announced that Admiral Manterolas' orders were that the rescued Americans were to be put aboard the *Alfonso the Twelfth*, where the injured would receive every attention: accordingly, as soon as the boats of the *Thetis* had picked up all they could find, they pulled alongside the Spanish warship, and delivered over their living, and in some cases terribly mutilated, freight to her officers and crew. Eighty-six men were rescued, sixty of them being wounded; and of this number the *Thetis's* boats were responsible for no less than twenty-nine, of whom seventeen were wounded. When at length, having pulled about for nearly an hour without finding any more people to pick up, Milsom reluctantly gave the word for the boats to return to the ship. The wreck, or rather that portion of her which yet remained above water, was still burning.

It was perhaps rather a peculiar circumstance that, upon the return of the boats from their mission of rescue, the saloon party aboard the *Thetis* should almost immediately separate and retire to their respective cabins, with nothing more in the way of conversation than a few curt questions and answers. The fact is that they were powerfully impressed with the conviction that they had that night witnessed, and been in an indirect way assisting at, an occurrence that was destined to exercise an important influence upon the history of two great nations. It is true that, at the moment, the occurrence presented all the appearance of a lamentable accident: but everybody was by this time fully aware of the fact that the trend of events had, for some time past, been of such a character as to cause America and Spain to regard each other with the utmost distrust, to which, on the part of Spain, was added a feeling of aversion not very far removed from hatred at what she regarded as the high-handed action of the United States in reference to certain points of dispute between the two countries; and there was probably not one intelligent person in Havana that night who did not feel convinced that unless the lamentable occurrence which had just happened should prove capable of an absolutely satisfactory explanation, there would certainly be very serious trouble in the immediate future. As for Jack and Milsom, they were both thinking hard, and it was well on toward daybreak ere either of them slept. The result of Milsom's meditations became apparent when, as was the custom, he joined the

saloon party at breakfast next morning. After exchanging with them the usual salutations he said, as he drew his chair up to the table:

"Well, Don Hermoso, after last night's happening I suppose you will be disposed to defer your departure until it can be seen what is to come of it, will you not?"

"Upon my word, Captain, I don't know," answered the Don. "In what way do you think it likely to exercise an influence upon our projected errand?"

"Through American intervention—to put the whole thing in a nutshell," answered Milsom. "Of course it is altogether too early yet to express an opinion in public upon the occurrence; but, strictly between ourselves, and in the privacy of this saloon, I don't mind saying that I believe the *Maine* was deliberately destroyed, and that the submarine which was stolen from this ship was the instrument by which that was done!"

"That is also my idea, Skipper," answered Jack. "And," he continued, "if our suspicion as to the guilt of the Spaniards should prove correct, there will be war between America and Spain; America will without doubt be the conqueror, and Spain will be forced to relinquish her hold on Cuba, without the need for further effort on the part of the revolutionaries. So far, therefore, as the purchase of additional munitions of war is concerned, I believe, Don Hermoso, that you may save your money."

"Indeed!" said Don Hermoso. "Then in that case, gentlemen, we may as well defer our departure until we see what is about to happen."

And they did.

The rest of the story is a matter of well-known history. A few days later a court of enquiry into the *Maine* disaster was opened on board the U.S. steamer *Mangrove*, then lying in Havana harbour, and sat continuously until March 21st; while the wreck of the warship was most carefully examined by divers, who laid the result of their observations before the court. The finding of the court was: "That the loss of the *Maine* was not in any respect due to fault or negligence on the part of any of the officers, or members of her crew; that the ship was destroyed by the explosion of a submarine mine, which caused the partial explosion of two or more of her forward magazines; and that no evidence has been obtainable fixing the responsibility for the destruction of the *Maine* upon any person or persons."

But, the last clause of the finding notwithstanding, there was probably not one United States citizen per hundred who did not feel morally convinced that the Spaniards were the guilty parties; and, that being the case, war was from that moment inevitable. On April 8, 1898, General Lee, the United States Consul-General, received orders to leave Cuba and hand over the charge of the United States interests to the British Consul; and on the following day he, with such American citizens as still remained in Havana, left for Florida in a gunboat. On April 18th a conference between the Committees of the two American Houses resulted in the adoption of a certain resolution, which was signed by President McKinley on the 20th of the same month: a copy was served upon Señor Polo y Bernabe, the Spanish Minister at Washington, who immediately asked for his passports, and left that city. On April 21st the President of the United States proclaimed the blockade of the Cuban coast from Cienfuegos westward to Cape San Antonio, and thence north and east past Havana to Cardenas; and as the bulk of the American fleet had been quietly concentrating at Key West from the date of the destruction of the *Maine*, the blockade was put into effect within eight hours of its declaration. On April 24th the Spanish Government formally recognised the existence of war between itself and the United States; and on the following day the United States Congress passed the following Bill without a division:—

"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in congress assembled:—

"*First*: That war be, and the same is hereby declared to exist, and that war has existed since the 21st day of April, a.d. 1898, including the said day, between the United States of America and the kingdom of Spain.

"*Second*: That the President of the United States be, and he hereby is, directed and empowered to use the entire land and naval forces of the United States, and to call into the actual service of the United States the militia of the several States, to such extent as may be necessary to carry this Act into effect."

This is not a story of the Spanish-American war. Let it suffice, therefore, to say that, after the landing of the Fifth Army Corps on the island of Cuba on June 24th, and the destruction of the Spanish squadron under Admiral Cervera on July 3rd, a protocol was signed on August 12th, and all hostilities were suspended; and finally, on January 1, 1899, the relinquishment of Spanish sovereignty over Cuba was formally accomplished, the Spanish flag being lowered and the Stars and Stripes temporarily hoisted in its place on the various forts and other Government buildings throughout the island. A singularly pathetic feature of the Spanish evacuation of Cuba was the solemn removal of the alleged remains of Christopher Columbus from their resting-place in Havana Cathedral, and their conveyance to Spain.

The state of the island by the time that the war was ended was of course dreadful beyond description: the inhabitants were, with a few exceptions, reduced to a state of absolute destitution; agriculture had practically ceased; commerce and industry were dead; brigandage was rampant; and, to use the expressive language of the historian, human misery had apparently reached its maximum possibility. Under such circumstances it was not at all difficult for Jack to secure a very large estate adjoining that of Señor Montijo upon exceptionally favourable terms; and although, like that of his friend, the estate consisted but of the soil, now overrun with weeds and the riotous vegetation of the Tropics, labour was abundant, and Jack and his friend Don Hermoso, spending their money freely, soon had every trace of the late troublous times swept away and fresh crops planted. Don Hermoso did not long survive the triumph of the cause which he had so nobly espoused: with the coming of peace there came also time for memory and retrospection, and time for him to miss the dear ones torn from him during the struggle; and shortly after the completion of his great work of restoring his estate to its original prosperous and well-managed condition he passed quietly away—not as the result of any disease in particular, but apparently because now he no longer had

anything to live for—and was laid to rest beside his wife.

As for Jack, he felt that after what he had seen of, and done in, Cuba, it was simply impossible for him to turn his back upon the island; he therefore disposed of his interest in the firm of Singleton, Murdock and Company, and invested the proceeds in the further extension and development of his already large estate, and to-day he and Carlos Montijo are two of the most popular, respected, and prosperous tobacco planters in the island. The *Thetis*, still in existence, is now the joint property of Jack and Carlos, and in her one or the other, and often both of them together, make frequent trips to England and elsewhere for the purpose of personally conducting their more extensive business transactions. She is still commanded by ex-Lieutenant Milsom, R.N., who never tires of congratulating himself that at last he finds himself in possession of what has every appearance of being a permanently “soft job.”

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