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Bandit Love

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"The City of Desire," "Passion Island," "Don Lorenzo's Bride," "The Spaniard," etc.

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BANDIT LOVE

CHAPTER I

Rotten Row on a brilliant June morning, and Hyde Park at its loveliest. The London "season" at its height, and throngs of fashionably-dressed men and women "taking the air," strolling idly to and fro, lounging on little green-painted chairs, or leaning on the rails watching the riders of all nationalities.

A sight well worth watching. It is the week of the International Horse Show, and there are many foreign officers in gaily-coloured uniforms, mounted on sleek and beautiful thoroughbreds, cantering along amidst a throng of more soberly clad riders of both sexes.

The "liver brigade" is at full strength. These red-faced, white-moustached, elderly men, with "Retired Colonel, Indian Army," stamped all over them, as it were, are probably telling each other, as they try to urge their hacks to a gallop, that "the Row is becoming demnably overcrowded, sir, and the place is going to the dogs. Those confounded foreigner fellows look like circus performers, and that sort of young woman wouldn't have been tolerated in my young days.... Gad! just look at that girl!"

The girl in question is mounted on a high-spirited bay which is resenting her mastery and is fighting to get the bit between his teeth. The horse rears, jerking his fine head from side to side, then bucks with a whinny of rage, and the "liver brigade" scatters. A mounted policeman, on the alert to render assistance and prevent accidents, brings along his well-trained steed at a hand-gallop, recognises the rider of the bucking thoroughbred, and reins up with a grin on his bronzed face.

He knows that Miss Myra Rostrevor, although she looks a mere slip of a girl, is quite capable of riding and handling almost any horse that ever was saddled, and is no more likely to be thrown than any of the Italian officers who have been competing for championships at the Olympia. He remembers, too, that when another woman's horse bolted with her a few weeks previously, Miss Rostrevor easily outdistanced him in pursuit of the runaway, brought the startled animal to a standstill, and rode off without waiting for a word of thanks from the scared rider.

Idlers lining the rails, however, ignorant of the identity and capabilities of Miss Myra Rostrevor, watch her struggle with her spirited steed apprehensively if they are ignorant of horsemanship, and with admiration if they are experienced.

"Ride him, missie, ride him!" ejaculates a lean, bronzed American involuntarily. "Gee! some girl! She's sure got you beat, horse, and you know it. Sits you as surely as an Arizona cowboy, and must have wrists like steel although she's got hands like a baby. Attaboy! ... Yep, she'll give you your head now, but I'll gamble she'll bring you back quiet as Mary's little lamb."

He was right. Myra Rostrevor gave her mount his head for a time and went the length of the Row, then reined him in, turned, and trotted him back at a pace that would scarce have shaken up the most liverish of the Indian Colonels. She eventually brought her horse to a standstill close to the rails, and patted his neck as she bent forward to chat smilingly to a tall, fair young man of aristocratic appearance and languid air.

"I said it! Some good-looker, too," resumed the American, and turned to a well-groomed stranger next to him, after eyeing the graceful horsewoman admiringly. "Say, sir, do you happen to know who that young lady is?" he inquired.

"Yes, I happen to know the young lady," responded the other, politely willing to satisfy the American's curiosity. "She is a Miss Rostrevor, daughter of a very old Irish family, and as wild a madcap as ever came out of the Emerald Isle."

"She looks it," the American commented. "There's a spice of devil in her expression, and I see she has red hair. I guess the man who marries her will sure need a bearing rein and a special bit and snaffle to keep that young beauty in order. But I'll bet she's not short of admirers, and lots of fellers'd jump at the chance of marrying her, and risk her kicking over the traces?"

"You are perfectly right, sir," answered the Englishman, with an amused laugh. "Miss Rostrevor has a host of admirers, which is hardly surprising, considering her remarkable beauty. Several young men have lost their heads about her, and she is credited—or should it be debited?—with having broken several hearts. Incidentally, the man to whom she is talking might be interested in your remark about the necessity for a special bit and snaffle. He and Miss Rostrevor are engaged to be married."

"Is that so?" drawled the American, gazing at the engaged couple with undisguised curiosity. "What is

he? A Lord, or Duke, or something of the sort?"

"No, he hasn't any title, but he is well-connected, and is one of the wealthiest and most eligible young men in England. His name is Antony Standish, and his income is reputed to be something like a hundred thousand pounds a year. His father was Sir Mark Standish, a great iron-master and coal magnate."

"You don't say! Lemme see. One hundred thousand pounds. That's round about five hundred thousand dollars. Some income! What does Mr. Antony Standish do?"

"Nothing, if you are referring to work. He does the usual Society rounds, takes an interest in racing, and roams the world occasionally in a palatial steam yacht. One does not have to worry about work if one has an income of one hundred thousand pounds a year."

"No, I guess I'd somehow manage to struggle along on half a million dollars a year myself and kiss work good-bye," said the American, with a broad grin. "The little lady sure seems to have made a catch, sir, judging from what you've told me, and yet Mr. Antony Standish somehow don't look to me to be her style. By the look of Miss Rostrevor, and the way she handled that horse, I should have guessed her fancy would have run to something more of the big, he-man type, instead of to a Society dandy. But one can never tell where women are concerned. And five hundred thousand dollars a year will make any kind of guy almost any kind of girl's ideal."

Antony Standish was not a "guy," in the colloquial English sense of the word, but he was hardly the type of man one would have imagined as likely to capture the heart of the high-spirited Irish beauty. He was good-looking, with a fair complexion and a little sandy moustache, and he carried himself with the air of a patrician, but his face lacked character, and he had rather a weak chin. He had earned the reputation of being one of the best-dressed men in London, had a host of friends, most of whom called him "Tony," and he was talked of as "a good sport."

"Sure, and I wasn't showing off at all, at all, Tony," Myra Rostrevor was saying to him in her soft, musical voice with a delightfully attractive touch of the brogue. "It was Tiger here that was trying to show off and make himself out to be my master.... Weren't ye, Tiger?" She patted the sleek neck of her horse again as she spoke, and he pricked his ears and tossed his head as if he understood. "There isn't any horse or man who is going to master Myra Rostrevor," she added.

"That sounds like a challenge, Myra," drawled Tony Standish smilingly. "How do you know but what I may adopt cave-man tactics after we are married, and attempt to beat you into submission?"

Myra tossed her red-gold head much in the same way as her spirited mount had tossed his, and trilled out a laugh.

"I think, Tony, you'd be even less successful than Tiger, and more sorry for yourself than he is after your very first attempt," she responded.

"So perhaps I'd better not make a first attempt, even in the hope of getting a pat on the neck afterwards," laughed Tony.

There was pride and admiration in his pale blue eyes as he looked up at the girl who had promised to marry him. He was the owner of many priceless art treasures, none of which, however, was half as beautiful in his eyes as Myra Rostrevor.

Her beauty was unique, and even in an assembly of lovely women she would have attracted attention. Yet her features were not classically perfect, her small nose had the faintest suspicion of tip-tilt, and there was nothing stately or majestic about her. No one had ever compared her to a Greek goddess, but even artists raved about her beauty and charm, and competed for the privilege of painting her portrait.

She was slim but shapely. Her hair was the auburn that Titian loved to paint, with a golden gleam in it, as if a sunbeam had become entangled and failed to escape. Her complexion, innocent of powder or cosmetics, was clear and delicate as a rose-leaf but with the faintest tinge of healthy tan. Her eyes, blue as summer seas, were fringed with long, dark lashes, and she had an aggravatingly seductive dimple in each cheek, and another in the centre of her daintily-rounded chin.

A lovely, fascinating and bewitching girl, whom the fates and the fairies had endowed with that undefinable gift we call "charm." And Myra had charmed the hearts out of many men, while remaining herself heart-whole. She was still heart-whole although she was engaged to be married to Tony Standish, and she had left her fiancé no illusions on that point.

"Yes, I'll marry you, Tony, but I don't love you," she had told him, when he proposed a second time

after having been rejected on the first occasion. "I'm going to marry you because Aunt Clarissa insists I must marry a rich man, and you happen to be the least objectionable rich man who wants me. I like you, Tony, and think you are rather a dear, but I want you to understand I'm not in love, and you will be buying me. I'm selling myself simply because I love all the good things of life, because you can pay for them, and because Aunt Clarissa keeps badgering me to marry and I am dependent on her for practically everything."

"You have turned down other fellows as rich as I am who were crazy about you, and other men much more attractive, so you must love me a little, Myra dear," Tony had responded. "I am going to make you love me a lot."

Antony Standish had a good conceit of himself, which was hardly surprising, for he was the only child of a very rich man, had been pampered and made much of in his childhood, and later had been toadied to and sought after by women as well as men, first as heir to, and subsequently as the actual possessor of, a vast fortune. Many girls with an eye on the main chance had set their caps at him, angled for him, and made no secret of their willingness to become Mrs. Antony Standish, and Tony was not unaware of the fact.

Perhaps it was because Myra Rostrevor had always seemed to be totally indifferent to him that he had lost his heart to her, and made up his mind to win her and make her his wife at all costs. It had not been easy, but Tony had found a very willing ally in the person of Myra's aunt, Clarissa, Lady Fermanagh. For Lady Fermanagh was only too anxious to get her orphan niece off her hands, not only because Myra was an expense, but because her madcap exploits occasionally drove her almost to distraction, while her heartbreaking flirtations were the cause of gossip.

Like her fiancé, Myra was an only child, who had been allowed to do everything she liked practically since infancy, and had come to expect, and accept, homage, almost as a right. Her father, Sir Dennis Rostrevor, had at one time been wealthy, but had lost practically everything in the Rebellion, when the great house that had been the home of the Rostrevors for generations was burned to the ground.

The loss broke his heart and killed him, and his death almost broke Myra's heart and left her for a time distraught and inconsolable, for she had loved and adored her handsome and indulgent father. Time, however, speedily heals grief's wounds when one is in the early twenties, and in the social whirl of English Society Myra had all but forgotten her loss and the dark days of tragedy in Ireland.

"Will you be at home if I call round in an hour or so?" inquired Tony, as Myra was about to move off, her horse becoming restive again. "I've got something important to discuss."

"Let me see," answered Myra. "I've got a luncheon appointment, then I'm going on to Hurlingham, dining with the Fitzpatricks, and going on later to Lady Trencrom's dance. Have to see my hairdresser and manicurist at eleven this morning, but I expect I shall be free by noon. Call about twelve, Tony, and don't forget to bring some chocolate and cigarettes with you."

"Righto, old thing!" said Tony smilingly, and his eyes followed Myra as she cantered away, the cynosure of many admiring glances.

Tony liked her to be admired. It seemed a compliment to his own good taste and discrimination. He liked to think that other men envied him his position as Myra's accepted lover. It pleased him to be pointed out as the lucky man who had won the heart and hand of the beautiful Miss Rostrevor, and he was not unconscious of the fact that he was being pointed out as he strolled along the Row after watching Myra out of sight.

"I remembered your instructions, darling," he announced, when he called on his betrothed at her aunt's house in Mayfair a couple of hours later. "Here we are! Chocs, your favourite brand of cigarettes, a few roses, and—er—just a little thing here that caught my eyes in Asprey's window, which I thought you might like."

The "little thing" he produced from his pocket was a platinum bracelet set with diamonds, and Myra uttered an involuntary exclamation of admiration as she opened the case containing it.

"How lovely! Sure, but you're an extravagant darlint, Tony! You deserve a kiss for this."

She just brushed Tony's cheek with her lips, and evaded him when he tried to enfold her in his arms.

"Myra, darling, I want to fix a date for our wedding," said Tony. "Let's get married before the Season is over, or early in the Autumn, and spend a long honeymoon in the East or in the South Seas. I want to make you all mine as soon as possible, dear. Let's arrange to get married next month."

Myra's smile faded, and she shook her red-gold head.

"Tony, darlint, I don't want to marry you just yet," she answered gently. "I told you when we became engaged that you must give me time to get accustomed to the idea of becoming your wife, time to try to fall in love with you first."

"Why not reverse the usual procedure, marry me first and fall in love with me after?" suggested Tony, and again Myra shook her head.

"I love taking risks, Tony, but that would be too great a risk," she responded. "It would be ghastly for us both if I married you and found myself incapable of loving you, and tragic if I fell in love with somebody else later. Please be patient, Tony. I am really and truly trying to fall in love with you."

"And you know I am tremendously in love with you, Myra, and want to make you all my own," said Tony, capturing her hands. "I know I can make you love me, and we will be enormously happy after we are married. Do be a darling and let me fix a date for our wedding."

"Be a dear, Tony, and don't press me," pleaded Myra. "We are happy enough as we are, and since we became engaged and Aunt Clarissa ceased to badger me, I've been having a gorgeous time. Let's postpone fixing a date for our marriage until next Spring, by which time I may be sure of my own heart. Perhaps it's an old-fashioned idea, but I'd like to be in love with the man I marry."

"I say, Myra!" exclaimed Tony, as if struck by a sudden idea, after a few moments of silence. "I say! A promise is a promise, you know. You won't throw me over and make me look and feel an ass, will you, if you should happen to meet someone you think you like better than me? You've promised to be my wife, you know."

"Yes, I know, Tony, but I also know you are too much of a sportsman to hold me to my promise if I should happen to fall in love with another man," Myra responded. "That isn't in the least likely to happen, Tony dear, and I am truly trying to love you in the way a girl should love the man she has promised to marry, as I have already told you. Let me have my freedom and my fling for a few months longer."

"Well, I suppose it isn't any use my trying to bully you into marrying me at once," said Tony, with a shrug, a sigh, and a wry smile. "But you know I'm tremendously in love with you, darling, and I can't help feeling jealous of the fellows who still go on dancing attendance on you although you are engaged to me. I'm haunted by the fear of someone stealing you from me."

"Tony, darlint, you've no need to be jealous," Myra smilingly assured him, and patted his cheek. "There isn't anyone else. Dozens of men profess to be in love with me, but there isn't a single man—or a married man either—that I'm the slightest little bit in love with. So don't worry! I promise you that if ever I do meet a man whom I'd rather marry than you, I'll tell you."

And with that Tony had, perforce, to be content.

CHAPTER II

A few hours later Myra was one of a fashionable and interested crowd watching the polo at Hurlingham. An exciting match was in progress, and Myra cried out enthusiastically as one of the players, after a thrilling *mêlée*, made a splendid shot, followed up, beat the defence, and scored a magnificent goal.

"Oh, well played, sir, well played!" Myra exclaimed enthusiastically, clapping her hands. "Who is he, Jimmy?" she added, turning to her escort, who was also applauding. "Do you know him?"

"I was introduced to him at a dinner at the Spanish Legation the other evening," her friend answered. "He's Governor of a Province, or something of the sort, in Spain, and a most interesting chap. Told me he spends most of his time out there hunting brigands and outlaws. Speaks English perfectly, and is good-looking enough to be a film star. Mentioned that he played polo and hoped to get a game to-day, but didn't hint that he was a star performer. I've got a rotten memory for names, but he's called Don Carlos de something-or-other." He consulted his programme. "Ah! here we are! Don Carlos de Ruiz.... Look! he's on the ball again. Well hit indeed, sir!"

At the end of the game Myra, at her own request, was introduced to Don Carlos de Ruiz, who was smilingly receiving the congratulations of English friends on his splendid play. At close quarters she found him to be a man of about thirty-five, very handsome, with clean-cut features, pale complexion, jet-black hair with a natural crinkle in it, and dark, inscrutable eyes that gleamed like black diamonds.

"Delighted to meet you, señor," said Myra, deciding at first glance he was one of the most attractive men she had ever seen. "Congratulations on the win. You played wonderfully."

"I am flattered and honoured, Miss Rostrevor," said Don Carlos, bowing low over her hand. "Praise from the most beautiful woman in England is praise indeed!"

He kissed her finger-tips, and Myra was conscious of an unusual thrill as she involuntarily jerked her hand away.

"Obviously you have the equivalent of a Blarney Stone in Spain, Don Carlos," she commented with a laugh, looking up into the bold dark eyes that were regarding her with undisguised admiration. "Do you play much polo in your own country, señor?"

"Alas, no!" Don Carlos answered. "My home is in the wilds of the Sierra Morena, Miss Rostrevor, and one has few opportunities for playing polo there. But we have good sport, nevertheless. We spend much of our time hunting a notorious brigand known as El Diablo Cojuelo, who plays hide-and-seek with us and defies capture. He kidnaps all the most beautiful of our girls, robs our rich men, and gives most of the proceeds of his robberies to the poor. The rascal even had the audacity to capture me and hold me to ransom. I had no alternative but to pay the price he demanded. Subsequently I led troops into the mountains in search of him, but he had vanished into thin air and has not since been seen. However, his disappearance and the cessation of his activities have enabled me to take a holiday, and I hope to spend some months in England. I fervently trust, Miss Rostrevor, that I shall have the pleasure of meeting you often."

"Thank you," said Myra, greatly interested. "I thought brigands were a thing of the past, and what you have told me makes me long to visit Spain. It would be tremendously thrilling to be captured and held to ransom by a Spanish brigand."

"Dear lady, if you were captured by El Diablo Cojuelo, all the riches of the Indies would not ransom you," Don Carlos responded, with a smile that showed a double row of gleaming white teeth. "Cojuelo is a connoisseur of feminine beauty, and were he fortunate enough to capture you, I feel certain nothing would induce him to part with you."

"There must certainly be the equivalent of a Blarney Stone in Spain," laughed Myra, nodding good-bye and turning away to rejoin her friends.

She met Don Carlos de Ruiz again that night at Lady Trencrom's dance, looking handsome and distinguished in full evening kit, with medals and orders in miniature glinting on his left lapel and a jewelled decoration on his breast. He recognised her instantly, and made his way masterfully through the crowd that surrounded her at the first interval.

"I shall have the pleasure of the next dance with you, Miss Rostrevor?" he said, and it struck Myra that his words were more by way of being an assertion than a question or a request.

"Indeed, señor, and you won't," she retorted in her soft Irish voice. "I'm dancing the next with my fiancé, Mr. Tony Standish. Here he is coming now... Tony, my dear, this is Don Carlos de Ruiz, who plays polo like an angel."

"Didn't know that angels played polo, but I'm pleased to meet you, Don Carlos," drawled Standish. "Frightful crush, isn't it?"

"Miss Rostrevor was going to dance the next number with me, Mr. Standish, but suddenly remembered she had promised to dance with you," said Don Carlos, with smiling sang-froid, as he shook hands. "If you would be so good as to resign your right in my favour—"

He paused with a questioning glance at Tony, who looked a trifle bewildered.

"Why—er—of course, if Miss Rostrevor so wishes," Tony said, just as the band struck up; and before Myra quite realised what was happening she found herself gliding round the room in the arms of Don Carlos.

"You certainly are not lacking in nerve, señor, and you apparently have no regard for the truth," she commented, recovering from her astonishment. "I never said I was going to dance with you."

"Sweet lady, I would perjure my soul for the privilege and pleasure of dancing with you," Don Carlos responded, smiling down into her blue eyes. "It is an honour and a delight to have for partner the most beautiful and charming girl in England. You dance divinely, señorita, and are light as thistle-down in my arms. My soul is enchanted, enraptured!"

"Away with your blarney!" exclaimed Myra, half-laughingly, half-impatiently, but conscious of a queer little thrill as she met his smiling glance. "Do you pay every woman you meet such fulsome and extravagant compliments, señor?"

"No, señorita, I am a connoisseur," answered Don Carlos, his tone quite serious but his black eyes twinkling. "And no compliment could be extravagant if applied to you, dear lady. One would have to be a great poet to find words to do justice to your beauty and charm."

He had a deep, musical voice which was infinitely attractive, and Myra found herself more than a little fascinated, and felt that she could listen to him all evening. But she tossed her red-gold head and laughed lightly.

"Should I respond by telling you in honeyed words that you dance as well as you play polo, and congratulate you on being a most delightful conversationalist?" she inquired in bantering tones. "Please don't be absurd!"

"Absurd?" repeated Don Carlos. "Sweet señorita, I am but speaking what is in my heart. Never have I seen any woman to compare with you. You are wonderful—my ideal! Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"It's surely daft the man is!" remarked Myra to the ceiling, before looking again into the bright eyes of her partner. "Pardon me, Don Carlos, but you are carrying your extravagant nonsense too far," she added.

Don Carlos raised his dark eyebrows in mock-surprise and sighed heavily.

"How have I offended, señorita? I have but asked a question which you have not answered. Let me explain that I have known women to fall in love with me at first sight, but never before have I myself been a victim."

"Sure, and it's a good conceit of himself the Don has, and he needs taking down a peg or two," said Myra to herself. "I am afraid I don't believe in love at first sight, Don Carlos, and the idea of any woman falling in love with you at first sight only makes me feel inclined to laugh," she said aloud. "Of course, the English conception of what love is and means may be totally different from the Spanish."

"But you are not of the cold-blooded English," Don Carlos objected, skilfully guiding her through the maze of dancers. "I have heard that the Irish are as warm-blooded as the Latins, and can love and hate with the same passionate intensity. You, I feel sure, dear lady, would be capable of loving wonderfully were your heart really awakened. And some instinct tells me it is I who will awaken your heart and kindle the fires of passion dormant within you."

The words, spoken in a low, caressing tone, thrilled Myra anew, but she made pretence of being shocked and offended.

"You flatter yourself, señor," she said, with a disdainful glance and a note of contempt in her sweet voice. "Unless you are entirely ignorant of English conventionalities, your remarks are unpardonable. Would you care to repeat to Mr. Standish, to whom I am engaged to be married, what you have just said?"

"Yes, if you so desire," responded Don Carlos calmly. "Conventionalities—English or otherwise—do not concern me. I follow the dictates of my heart in all things, and I am master of my own destiny. Shall I tell your Mr. Standish that I fell in love with you the first moment I saw you, and that I mean to take you from him by hook or by crook?"

"I think you must be crazy!" exclaimed Myra, at heart just a little scared, but more than a little fascinated. "Surely even in the wilds of Spain it is considered dishonourable to attempt to make love to a girl who is betrothed to another man?"

"Not if one is prepared to fight the other man," Don Carlos replied, with a sudden smile. "I am quite prepared to fight for you, believe me. As for making love, dear lady, I have not even yet begun to make love to you in earnest. My love is a raging torrent which will overwhelm you and sweep you off your feet, a raging fire which will set your heart aflame in sympathy."

"I'm thinking, Don Carlos, that you must be a bit Irish yourself to mix up torrents and flames, and the

sooner you let the torrent put your fires out the better I'll be pleased," said Myra, with forced lightness, after a pause, during which she decided it would be best to treat the whole matter as a joke. "Incidentally, you are carrying your jest too far, and I shall be seriously annoyed if you persist in this nonsense."

"Even if I have mixed my metaphors, señorita, I assure you I have never been more serious in my life," Don Carlos retorted. "May I call on you to-morrow to convince you of that fact?"

"No, thank you, señor," answered Myra. "And if you are really in earnest, I shall instruct the servants that I am never at home to Don Carlos de Ruiz."

"You are cruel, dear lady, but I warn you I am not to be rebuffed," said Don Carlos. "Love will surely find a way."

The music ceased as he spoke, and Myra disengaged herself from his encircling arm and darted away from him, glad to escape. She could not have analysed her own feelings, and found herself at a loss to know how to deal with the situation. To complain to Tony Standish seemed futile. Tony, if she told him what had happened, would, of course, be indignant and demand an explanation, and Myra felt sure in her own mind he would come off second best if there was a scene and a personal encounter.

"Sure, and is it frightened you are of the conceited Spaniard?" she asked herself. "You've prided yourself on being a match for any man, and being able to keep any ardent suitor at arm's length, and here you are in a funk! It's ashamed of you I am, Myra Rostrevor!"

She did actually feel ashamed of herself for being so disturbed by Don Carlos's extravagant words, and mentally decided she would snub him severely at the first opportunity.

The opportunity presented itself sooner than she anticipated. Next afternoon she strolled into her aunt's drawing room, and her heart gave a queer little convulsive jump when she found Lady Fermanagh engaged in animated conversation with Don Carlos.

"Myra, dear, I'm so glad you have come in," exclaimed her aunt. "Allow me to introduce Don Carlos de Ruiz. Don Carlos, my niece, Miss Myra Rostrevor."

Don Carlos was on his feet, and he bowed low smilingly.

"Miss Rostrevor and I have already been introduced, dear lady, but I did not know the señorita was your niece," he said. "What a delightful surprise! I had the honour of dancing with Miss Rostrevor last night at Lady Trencrom's ball."

As on the previous night, Myra found herself somewhat at a loss. She gave him her hand, and he bowed over it, holding it a moment longer than necessary. At that moment a footman appeared at the drawing room door.

"Pardon, your ladyship," he said. "The Countess of Carbis wishes to speak to you on the telephone."

"Good! I particularly want to speak to her," said Lady Fermanagh, rising. "Excuse me, Don Carlos. Myra, my dear, give Don Carlos some tea."

Don Carlos laughed softly as the door closed behind her ladyship, and his dark eyes were sparkling wickedly as he looked at Myra.

"Did I not warn you, sweet lady, that love would find a way?" he said. "We have a proverb in Spain that the way to make sure of winning a girl is to make love to her mother. As you have no mother, I made love last night to Lady Fermanagh, who, I was told, is your guardian, and she invited me to call. Hence my presence here. The fates are kind, and now I can make love to you in earnest. Myra, darling, my heart is all afire with love for you, and all my being is crying out for you."

Myra drew herself up to her full height, regarding him disdainfully and endeavouring to put all the hauteur she could summon up into her manner and expression.

"Here in England, Don Carlos, we call a man a cad who persists in attempting to force his unwanted attentions on a girl," she remarked icily. "I do not know if there is a Spanish equivalent for the word cad."

"'Cad'? Let me think," drawled Don Carlos, seemingly not a whit rebuffed, his dark eyes still twinkling mischievously. "In Spanish, 'cad' would be 'mozo' or 'caballerizo.' 'Caballerear' means to set up for a gentleman. You must let me teach you Spanish, Myra. It is an ideal language in which to make love. Let me tell you in Spanish that I love you, that you are the most beautiful, adorable, fascinating and

seductive girl I have ever met, the loveliest and most enticing creature ever created, the woman of my dreams, my ideal, and my predestined mate."

"Let me tell you in plain English that you are the most impudent, offensive and exasperating man I have ever met!" exclaimed Myra, shaken by a gust of angry resentment. "I don't want to talk to you, señor, and I repeat that you are behaving like a cad!"

Don Carlos sighed lugubriously and turned up his eyes to the ceiling.

"I am spurned!" he lamented, as if soliloquising. "I am desolated! The most wonderfully beautiful girl in the world rebuffs me and calls me a cad when I offer her my heart and the love for which many another woman would barter her very soul! My Myra thinks I am the most exasperating and impudent man in the world! Condenacion! Still, I must be unique in one respect!" He lowered his eyes to look at Myra again. "So this is English hospitality, señorita!" he resumed, after a pause. "The Lady Fermanagh, your charming aunt, told you to offer me tea, but not even a spoonful have you proffered me."

He assumed such an absurdly pathetic expression that Myra laughed in spite of herself, and quite forgot to continue to be angry and offended.

"You are an utterly impossible person, Don Carlos," she commented, dimpling into smiles. "Sit down and let me give you tea and anything else you want."

"Ten thousand thanks, Myra!" cried Don Carlos. "How wonderful! Anything else I want! The tea does not matter, but I want ten thousand kisses from the woman who has entranced and enraptured my heart. I want to hold you in my arms, Myra mine, clasped close to my breast, to set your darling heart afire with burning kisses, to kiss the heart out of you then kiss it back again all aflame with love and longing. Myra, darling, I love you as I have never loved before, and I want you for my wife."

He stretched out his arms as if to enfold Myra in them, but she evaded him adroitly. She had been listening half-fascinated, conscious of the spell of his personality, thrilled by the passionate tones of his deep, musical voice, but she broke the spell and recovered herself in an instant.

"Quite an effective piece of play-acting!" she remarked, forcing a laugh. "You really should be on the stage, Don Carlos, or acting for the movies. I feel sure you would be a success as a film actor, and all the flappers would lose their hearts to you. Will you have some tea?"

"Myra, I am not acting," Don Carlos protested, at last showing signs of chagrin. "I am in deadly earnest. I love you and want you, and the Devil himself will not prevent me from making you my own."

"His Satanic Majesty need not concern himself with the affair at all, at all," retorted Myra, regarding him coldly. "Let me save him the trouble by assuring you that your eloquent and melodramatic protestations of love leave me cold, and your boast that no woman has ever been able to resist you inspired me only with contempt for your conceit. Let me remind you again, also, that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Antony Standish, and assure you I have not the slightest intention of transferring my affections from an English gentleman to a Spaniard who evidently prides himself on being a sort of modern Don Juan."

Don Carlos's face went white beneath the tan as he listened to the scathing words, and a gleam of anger flashed into his dark eyes.

"You do me an injustice, and I think you are doing your own heart an injustice, Myra," he said, in a curiously quiet voice, after a momentary pause. "If——"

"I object to your calling me by my Christian name," Myra interposed abruptly, intent on snubbing him. "May I remind you we met for the first time yesterday. I can hardly imagine that in your own country you would dare to call a girl 'Myra' a few hours after meeting her for the first time."

"My dear Miss Rostrevor, I can lay my hand on my heart and assure you on my word of honour that never in Spain have I ever called a girl 'Myra,' either within a few hours or a few years of our first meeting," said Don Carlos, his eyes beginning to twinkle again. "That may be explained by the fact that I have never heard the name before. But I think it is a charming name, which somehow fits you. Incidentally, señorita, may I venture to point out that you have been addressing me as 'Don Carlos,' instead of as 'Señor de Ruiz'? You have been calling me by my Christian name."

"That was only because I thought 'Don' was a sort of Spanish equivalent of 'Sir' in English," Myra responded, somewhat taken aback. "Here I should address a Knight or a Baronet as 'Sir Charles' without the slightest idea of being familiar, but I should not expect him to respond by addressing me as 'Myra.' Do I make myself plain?"

"Dear lady, you could never make yourself plain, you who are so beautiful, but you are explicit," answered Don Carlos with a radiant smile that made him look quite boyish. "I stand rebuked, Myra, but I am impenitent. Surely one is not committing a crime by calling the girl one loves by her Christian name? I would prefer to call you *cara mia* or *querida*, which are the Spanish equivalents for my beloved and sweetheart, but, of course, as you seem to think I——"

"Señor de Ruiz, I have had enough of this nonsense!" Myra interrupted, impatiently. "Your attempts at love-making are utterly distasteful, and if you imagine you are going to add me to your list of conquests you are a case for a mental specialist."

"Alas!" exclaimed Don Carlos, and again sighed heavily. "You seem to think I am a sort of mountebank who makes a hobby of paying court to women. You misjudge me, Myra. True, I have made love to women before, true, many have fallen in love with me and thrown themselves at my head—as you say in English. True——"

"You are boasting again," interposed Myra once more. "I have no desire or inclination to listen to an account of your amorous conquests."

"But you must listen, Myra," said Don Carlos earnestly. "You misjudge me. True, there have been many women in my life, but not one who inspired love, not one to whom I offered my heart, not one whom I had any wish to marry. Long ago it was foretold by a gipsy gifted with second sight that I should meet my fate in my thirty-fifth year in a foreign land, meet my ideal, the woman of my dreams. That prophecy has come true. The moment our eyes first met yesterday I knew you were the woman for whom I had been seeking and waiting. It is useless to fight against destiny, Myra. I shall win you by hook or by crook, and make you all mine."

"That sounds like a challenge, Don Carlos," retorted Myra with forced lightness. "As you believe in gipsy forecasts, however, let me tell you that a gipsy woman 'read my hand' a few years ago, warned me to beware of a tall, dark man, and foretold that I should marry a tall, fair man. If she was right, you are obviously the tall, dark man of whom I am to beware, just as Tony Standish is the man I am destined to marry."

"Pouf! I pay no heed to the foolish prattle of so-called gipsy fortune-tellers," said Don Carlos, smiling again. "The seer who foretold that I should meet and win you was King of the Spanish Gypsies, and his every prophecy comes true."

"Well, to make his prophecy come true as far as you are concerned, Don Carlos, you will have to fall in love with someone other than me," responded Myra. "Hadn't you better have some tea, señor?"

CHAPTER III

To Myra's relief, Lady Fermanagh returned just then, full of apologies for having been detained so long at the telephone.

"I hope Myra has been keeping you entertained, señor," she inquired, and Don Carlos nodded smilingly.

"More than entertained, Lady Fermanagh," he answered. "Miss Rostrevor and I have been discussing predestination. I have been telling her it was foretold by the King of the Gypsies that in this, my thirty-fifth year, I should meet my ideal, the woman predestined to be my wife. I have met her. The prophecy has come true."

"I'm afraid it is another case of mistaken identity, Aunt Clarissa," interposed Myra. "Señor de Ruiz has made the amazing and amusing suggestion that I am the woman! Did you ever hear anything more absurd?"

She thought to cover Don Carlos with confusion, but he did not turn a hair.

"Alas, Lady Fermanagh, your charming niece refuses to take me seriously!" he smilingly lamented. "It seems she was warned as a child to beware of a tall, dark, handsome man, and to put no faith in his honeyed words. I am desolated—but only temporarily!"

"From what I can make of it, you appear to have been engaged in a 'leg-pulling' contest," commented

Lady Fermanagh, darting a quick glance from one to the other, and deciding that Myra was probably evolving some mischievous joke. "You don't mean to tell me seriously, Don Carlos, that you have any faith in the predictions of a gipsy?"

"Dear lady, since the King of the Gypsies predicted I should get my heart's desire, surely it would be almost heresy to doubt?" Don Carlos replied, with a side-glance at Myra. "In my own country I have the reputation always of gaining anything on which I set my heart, and here I intend to live up to my reputation. Assuredly the Gypsy King's prediction will come true, your ladyship."

He took his leave a few minutes later, pleasing Lady Fermanagh greatly by bowing low over her hand and raising her fingers to his lips.

"One of the most charming men I have met for years," the old lady remarked, when the door closed behind him. "He is a true Spanish grandee, with all the grace of a born courtier. I think it was exceedingly rude of you, Myra, to snatch your hand away as you did when Don Carlos was going to kiss your fingertips."

"Personally, Aunt, I think he is the most arrogant, ill-mannered and insufferably conceited man I have ever met," Myra responded warmly. "He openly boasts that no woman can resist him, prides himself on his conquests, and while you were out of the room he was making passionate love to me, and only made fun of my attempts to snub him. I hope you won't invite the horrible creature here again."

Lady Fermanagh regarded her in amazement for a few moments, then dissolved into laughter.

"Oh, you modern girls!" she exclaimed. "You think you know such a lot and are so advanced, yet you are as easily scared or fooled as any country maiden in Victorian times."

"My dear aunt, Don Carlos de Ruiz can neither scare nor fool me," protested Myra; "but surely I have a right to object to his attempting to make love to me when he knows I am engaged to Tony Standish."

"Remember he is a Spaniard, my dear," said her aunt, with a tolerant smile. "The greatest compliment a Latin can pay a woman is to make love to her—and the majority make love merely by way of being complimentary. Don Carlos de Ruiz probably makes love to every woman he meets, which very likely explains why he is so popular. Why, my dear, he almost made love to me!"

"But he didn't tell you he wanted to marry you, did he, Aunt Clarissa, swear he would win you by hook or by crook, and vow that Old Nick himself would not prevent him from making you his own?" inquired Myra, beginning to smile again.

Lady Fermanagh laughed heartily.

"No, my dear, he certainly did not go as far as that," she answered. "You don't mean to tell me he actually said something to that effect to you?"

"Yes, both last night at the dance, and again a few minutes ago—and he said it as if he meant it. I have half a mind to ask Tony to tell the arrogantly conceited Spaniard not to pester me with his attentions again."

"My dear child, don't make yourself ridiculous by doing anything so foolish. You need not take Don Carlos too seriously. He is very much a man of the world, probably something of a Don Juan, and likely makes love as a pastime. I met many of his type when your Uncle was in the Diplomatic Service—wealthy bachelors who made love to almost every pretty woman they met, provided always, however, that the woman was married or engaged, and there was no danger of being caught in the matrimonial net. I should say, my dear, judging from my experience, that Don Carlos probably would only have paid you compliments instead of making love to you, if he had not known you were engaged."

"That sort of philanderer deserves to be kicked or horsewhipped, Aunt Clarissa, for making a mockery of love."

"Oh, I don't know about that, my dear Myra. After all, as I have told you, men of the Latin races make love almost indiscriminately by way of paying a compliment, and pretty women in Spain, Italy, or France, would feel quite insulted if the men to whom they were introduced did not profess to be hopelessly in love with them. If you had lived abroad, Myra, you would feel flattered rather than annoyed."

"Maybe—and maybe not," said Myra, with a toss of her red-gold head. "If you are right, then Don Carlos is merely trying to amuse himself at my expense. I have no use for a professional philanderer who imagines that no woman can resist him. Him and his King of the Gypsies prophecy! Pouf!"

Yet as she dressed for dinner a little later she found herself recalling the passionate words of Don Carlos, remembering the ardent light in his dark eyes, the vibrant note in his deep, musical voice, found herself wondering, wondering, and wishing with all her heart that Tony Standish was a little more like Don Carlos de Ruiz.

"I'm not scared of him, and I am certainly not going to lose my heart to him," Myra whispered to her reflection in the mirror. "If Aunt Clarissa is right, he is only making love to me for his own amusement, and would sheer off if I took him seriously and expected him to marry me. A pretty fool I should look if I fell in love with him, broke off my engagement to Tony, and then Don Carlos levanted! But I'm not going to fall in love with him.... He certainly is fascinating, and he would be a wonderful lover if he were in earnest, but he can't make a fool of Myra Rostrevor. I'll show the conceited creature that there is one girl at least who does not find him irresistible, and I'll give him the cold shoulder again at the first opportunity."

Yet again she had the opportunity sooner than she had expected. Almost it seemed as if the fates were playing into the hands of Don Carlos. That very evening Myra discovered, to her inward consternation, that Don Carlos de Ruiz was the guest of honour at the dinner-dance to which she had been invited, and her hostess, finding they had met before, placed them together at the dinner table.

"Truly, the gods are good, fair lady!" exclaimed Don Carlos, his dark eyes sparkling. "I am the most fortunate of men to have so lovely and charming a partner. And I think I have reason to congratulate myself on contriving to surprise you twice within a few hours."

"A very unpleasant surprise," commented Myra coldly. "After what happened an hour or two ago, I should have begged to be excused from this party if I had known you would be present."

"Alas! señorita, it is sad to find you still rebelling against destiny," said Don Carlos. "Yet I am flattered, for your desire to avoid me does but prove you are afraid of losing your heart to me, and you know that only by avoiding me can you delay the day of surrender."

"Sure, señor, if conceit were a disease you would have died of it long since," retorted Myra, and turned to talk to the man on her other side.

She ignored Don Carlos completely for some time, but she found herself listening to his deep, musical voice as he chatted to his hostess and modestly acknowledged compliments fired at him across the table by a polo enthusiast. When common politeness at last compelled her to turn to speak to him again, it was to find his eyes still twinkling mischievously.

"A thousand thanks, señorita, for giving me the opportunity of admiring your beautiful back for so long," he said in a low voice. "It is flawless. Your skin is smooth as polished marble, yet soft and sweet as the petals of a rose."

"Your compliments are becoming tedious, señor," Myra remarked, assuming an air of boredom. "Am I expected to endure this kind of talk all evening?"

"All the days of your life, I hope, señorita," Don Carlos answered calmly. "In the intervals of making love to you, Myra, I shall sing the praises of your beauty even after you are all mine."

"Don Carlos, you are quite impossible!" exclaimed Myra. "I warn you again I shall take precautions to avoid you in future if you persist in this folly."

"That will necessitate your cancelling all your engagements, or nearly all of them, for the rest of the season," responded Don Carlos. "Already I have contrived to obtain an invitation to practically every function at which you are likely to be present. Your aunt was good enough to show me your engagement book this afternoon. Dear lady, I assure you that you will find it difficult to avoid me."

Myra fancied he was boasting again, but he was stating facts, as she subsequently discovered. At practically every Society function she attended during the next few weeks, save for a few private parties, Don Carlos de Ruiz was a fellow guest, and invariably he contrived to talk to her and make love, even when Tony Standish was also present, and ignored the snubs and rebuffs she administered.

"Sure, and I'm beginning to feel something like the fox must feel when the hounds are in full cry after him," soliloquised Myra, as she drove home one night after another vain attempt to rebuff Don Carlos. "No wonder he is able to boast of so many conquests if he has pursued every other woman who took his fancy as relentlessly as he is pursuing me! What can I do?"

What made Myra's position the more embarrassing was that de Ruiz and Standish had become very friendly, Don Carlos having exercised his personal magnetism to the utmost to win Tony's regard. One

hobby they actually had in common was collecting old jade, and on discovering this Don Carlos sent to Spain for two of the choicest and rarest of his pieces—ancient Chinese sword ornaments of jade set with gold. These he presented to Tony, who was delighted, but protested that he could not accept so valuable a gift without making some return.

"Later, I promise you, my dear Standish, I shall take one of your treasures," said Don Carlos in his charming way. "Meanwhile accept these trifles as a token of my esteem. It is a joy to give to a fellow collector something which money cannot buy, and it will be a delight to take from you something you prize. By the way, let me remind you again of your promise to come to my place in Spain this winter to see my collection. I shall be pleased and honoured to entertain you and any of your friends at El Castillo de Ruiz."

"Thanks. Frightfully good of you, Don Carlos," said Tony. "If I make my usual cruise in my yacht this year I shall certainly make a point of visiting you. I say, if you are not already booked, what about doing me the honour of being one of my guests at Auchinleven in August for the shooting, and then being one of the yachting party later on if I arrange a cruise. I shall be charmed if you will."

"My dear Mr. Standish, you are too good," exclaimed Don Carlos, with unaffected delight. "Ten thousand thanks! Nothing will give me greater pleasure. I gladly and gratefully accept your invitation, but you must promise to allow me to attempt to return your hospitality in Spain. I cannot promise you much in the way of sport, except, perhaps, a little brigand shooting, but I can promise you some novel experiences."

"Thanks awfully," said Tony. "I must tell Myra, and show her your beautiful present."

Myra gazed at her fiancé in wide-eyed amazement and consternation when she heard the news.

"Tony Standish, you must be blind and crazy!" she burst out tempestuously. "I won't come to Auchinleven if Don Carlos is to be one of your house party. I won't! Surely you must have seen for yourself that Don Carlos has been making love to me on every possible occasion for weeks? Yes, right in front of your very nose, Tony. He said he would see to it that we were fellow-guests for the shooting—and now you have invited him to Auchinleven!"

"I—er—I say, Myra, this is news to me," exclaimed Tony, flabbergasted. "You—er—you don't actually mean to say that Don Carlos has been making love to you in earnest? I can't imagine his doing such a thing. I mean to say he—er—he seems an awfully good sort, although he is a foreigner, and he and I have become quite pally. He seems quite a good sport, and he does not strike me as being the sort of chap who would poach on another fellow's preserves. Really, Myra, this is quite a shock!"

"If you are referring to me as your 'preserves,' Tony, Don Carlos has certainly been poaching—or trying to poach," said Myra. "He persists in making love to me and refuses to be rebuffed, and he has repeatedly sworn that he will take me from you and make me his own at all costs."

"The deuce he has!" ejaculated Tony, surprised, indignant, and flustered. "I say, Myra dear, I—er—I wish—er—I wish you'd told me this before—I mean before he and I became pally, I had no idea he was really making love to you. No idea, I assure you. If I'd known, I certainly wouldn't have invited him to Auchinleven or accepted his presents. Now I don't know what the deuce to do. I'm in a frightfully awkward position. Frightfully awkward!"

"Frightfully awkward!" Myra mimicked. "Oh, Tony, don't be such a duffer! Unless you want to lose me, you've got to tell Don Carlos de Ruiz—and tell him very, very plainly—that his attempts to make love to me and win me away from you have got to stop. You've got to warn him off."

"Why, of course I will, darling," said Tony, in flustered haste. "Confound the fellow! I should not have believed it of him. Never heard of such outrageous conduct. I'll go and see him at once, Myra, and warn him that if he dares to attempt to make love to you again I'll—er—I'll show him! Yes, by Jove!"

He rushed off, full of righteous indignation but still feeling he was in a "frightfully awkward position," to interview Don Carlos, whom he found wearing a silken dressing gown and stretched out luxuriously among cushions on a settee in his suite at the Ritz.

"My dear Standish, how good of you to return my call so soon!" cried Don Carlos, rising with a welcoming smile as Tony was shown in. "I am truly delighted to see you. You know what a pleasure is an unexpected visit from a friend when one is feeling bored. Sit down and make yourself comfortable, my dear Standish, and let me mix you a drink."

"Er—no, thank you," said Standish, disarmed to some extent at the outset, for he felt it would be boorish and "bad form" to have a row with a man who seemed to hold him in high regard. "No, I won't

have a drink. As a matter of fact, Don Carlos, I have called to see you in connection with—er—with a delicate personal matter."

"My dear Mr. Standish, I am flattered that you should make me your confidant, and I shall be only too pleased if I can assist you."

"Assist me! Hang it all, sir, you—er—you don't seem to understand!" spluttered Tony, taken aback again, but determined, nevertheless, to "have it out" with the Spaniard. "I—er—I haven't called to take you into my confidence or anything of the sort. I have come to demand an explanation."

"An explanation?" Don Carlos raised his black eyebrows in seeming bewilderment. "An explanation? Concerning what, Mr. Standish?"

"Concerning your outrageous conduct, sir," blurted out Tony, trying to look fierce, but succeeding only in looking hot and embarrassed. "Concerning Myra—Miss Rostrevor. She tells me you have persistently been attempting to make love to her ever since you first met her, and have even gone so far as to ask her to throw me over and elope with you! What the deuce do you mean by it, sir? Miss Rostrevor, as you are well aware, is engaged to be married to me. How dare you make love to my fiancée?"

CHAPTER IV

Don Carlos's eyebrows rose still higher, his lips twitched, and Tony Standish got the impression that it was only with difficulty he was refraining from laughing outright. That angered him, and his ruddy face became still redder.

"Well, what have you to say for yourself?" he demanded, after a pause. "This is no laughing matter."

"My dear Mr. Standish, what can I say for myself?" Don Carlos retorted, quietly and gravely. "Your demand for an explanation places me in a most embarrassing position. How should one answer in the circumstances. If Miss Rostrevor has told you I have been making love to her, I cannot deny the accusation without casting doubt on the word of the most charming and beautiful girl in the world. Yet if I admit that Miss Rostrevor is justified in her accusation, you may decide I have been acting dishonourably, and I shall lose your friendship. *Condenacion!* Was ever man placed in such an awkward position!"

"Look here, you will certainly make matters worse if you dare to insinuate that Myra was not telling the truth," exclaimed Standish hotly.

"I quite appreciate that, my dear Mr. Standish, and I realise, also, that Miss Rostrevor would be justified in hating me if I dared to cast doubt on her assertions," said Don Carlos more gravely than ever, with a sigh and a shrug. "So I must, perforce, confess that I have been making persistent love to Miss Rostrevor ever since I first met her, and—well, I am quite prepared to take the consequences. How do you deal with such a situation in England? In my country we would fight a duel, and the lady would marry the survivor. Should you think of fighting a duel, however, Mr. Standish, it is only fair to warn you that I am an expert swordsman and a dead shot. How shall we deal with the matter?"

Baffled, and at a loss to know how to deal with the situation, Tony Standish glowered at him, with the uncomfortable sensation that he was making a fool of himself, and that Don Carlos was inwardly laughing at him.

"It isn't a matter to jest about," he said stiffly. "That sort of thing isn't done in England, and I must ask you to refrain from approaching Miss Rostrevor again."

"I am desolated, señor!" exclaimed Don Carlos, with a despairing gesture. "I find it difficult to understand the English conventionalities in the matter of love-making. If you were Spanish, my dear Standish, you would not complain of my making love to your betrothed unless you were unsure of her and were afraid of my winning her away from you. If you regard me as a dangerous rival, and the adorable Miss Rostrevor takes me seriously, and you are afraid——"

"That isn't the point, Don Carlos," hastily interposed Tony, beginning to regret having made so much fuss. "I—er—I am willing to believe that you have not seriously been trying to steal Myra's affections

away from me, or that possibly Myra may have taken you too seriously."

"How can a mere man hope to read what is in the heart of a woman?" responded Don Carlos, helping himself to a cigarette. "Our Spanish girls, if they think an accepted lover is not sufficiently devoted and attentive, will complain that another man is making passionate love—thus arousing the lover's jealousy and re-firing him with ardour; and a married woman will invent a lover and complain of his attentions for the same reason, if her husband's love seems to be cooling."

"I say, Don Carlos, are you suggesting that Myra complained for that reason—because she thinks I'm not keen enough?"

"My dear Standish, I am not suggesting anything. I am merely trying to explain the psychology of the women of my own country as I understand it. Yet I doubt if Englishwomen differ very greatly, after all, from their Latin sisters where affairs of the heart are concerned. Won't you have a cigarette?"

Tony accepted a cigarette from the silver-and-cedar-wood box that was slid across the table to him, and he lit it with thoughtful deliberation. Had Myra complained about Don Carlos making love to her just to keep him "up to scratch," he was wondering, and found himself more puzzled than ever. He knew that lots of men had been, and probably still were, in love with Myra, and that fact made him the more proud to be her accepted lover. He recalled Myra's boast that there was no horse or man she could not master, and he found it a little difficult to believe she was really scared of Don Carlos.

"In my country, Mr. Standish, a man betrothed to a girl as beautiful as Miss Rostrevor would feel almost insulted if his friends did not openly envy him and protest themselves hopelessly in love with the young lady he had won," resumed Don Carlos. "The lady herself would feel slighted if the friends of her betrothed did not continue to attempt to make love to her. To profess to be heartbroken because she belongs to another, and to make love to a betrothed girl or a married woman, is surely paying an indirect compliment to the accepted lover or husband, as well as a direct compliment to the lady."

"Humph! I hadn't thought of it that way," commented Tony drily. "It would never have occurred to me for a moment that in making love to Myra you were paying me any sort of compliment. Here in England, Don Carlos, any man who persists in making love to an engaged girl or a married woman is asking for trouble. Of course, I can appreciate the fact that most women would feel flattered by the thought that a man like you had fallen in love with them, even if you were only pretending out of a desire to be polite, but—er—well, obviously Myra appears to be more annoyed than flattered. Perhaps, as I said before, she has taken you too seriously."

"Or possibly not seriously enough," responded Don Carlos, his grave face crinkling into a smile. "I am hopelessly in love with her, my dear Standish, and mean to make her fall in love with me. What are we going to do in the circumstances?"

"Really, I don't know, Don Carlos," answered Standish, deciding that the other was jesting. "It's frightfully awkward. Frightfully! Er—you see, old chap, Myra says she won't come to Auchinleven for the shooting if you are going to be one of the party, and—er—well, as you can understand, that places me in a frightfully awkward position."

"I fully realise that, Mr. Standish," said Don Carlos very gravely, after a long pause which increased Tony's embarrassment. "I, also, am now placed in an awkward position. I have told many of my friends and acquaintances to-day that I have been invited to Auchinleven for the shooting by my friend Mr. Antony Standish, and now I shall have to explain to everyone that the invitation is cancelled because my friend fears I shall continue to make love to his fiancée, and Miss Rostrevor fears I may abduct her, persuade her to elope with me, or something of the sort. Yes, decidedly a difficult situation!"

"Here, I say, Don Carlos, you'll make me and Myra the laughing-stock of London if you tell people that!" Tony protested, looking quite distressed. "Myra will be furious with me and with you, and—er—I—I suppose you are thinking I am a mean sort of skunk. I'm frightfully sorry! I say, old chap, can't you suggest some way out of the difficulty?"

"Well, possibly if I were permitted to have a talk with Miss Rostrevor, and explain why I have been making love to her, she might understand matters better and raise no objection to my figuring as a guest at Auchinleven," said Don Carlos, after another thoughtful pause.

"Jolly good idea!" Tony exclaimed. "I'm quite sure if you explained matters tactfully to Myra she would understand you have really only been trying to pay her compliments. Myra's a good sort, and I feel sure she will accept your explanation."

Don Carlos made no immediate response. He dropped his cigarette into an ash-tray, rose to his feet with a sigh, and strolled to the window of his sitting room to gaze out absently across the Green Park.

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid," he said at length, as if to himself. "So it is written in the Book of Proverbs."

"Er—I say, old chap, I—I hope you are not going to take this too much to heart," remarked Tony, again feeling puzzled and uncomfortable. "If only Myra understands and appreciates what your love-making meant——"

"I shall be happy—provided she responds in the way I desire," broke in Don Carlos, swinging round suddenly from the window, his face lighting up into a smile again. "Of course, if Miss Rostrevor is afraid of me, or if you are afraid I shall take her from you and desire to cancel your invitation on that account, I——"

"There isn't any question of that, Don Carlos," Tony interrupted in turn. "At least, I—er—I don't think Myra is afraid of you. I fancy she has merely misunderstood your intentions."

"I should not have imagined that to be possible," said Don Carlos. "However, when I have discussed the situation with the charming lady, perhaps she will decide to allow me to be a guest at Auchinleven. I warn you, my dear Standish, that I shall not promise to refrain from making love to her, and will continue to try to win her heart. I think I can take the risk of your challenging me to mortal combat."

He looked with a challenging smile at Tony, who laughed, imagining that he was making a jest of the whole affair.

"I hardly fancy it will be a case of 'pistols for two; coffee for one,'" Tony said; "and I feel sure you will be able to make peace with Myra. As a matter of fact, Don Carlos, I am beginning to wonder now if Myra has been pulling my leg. She has played jokes on me more than once before and made me feel rather an ass."

"Perhaps on this occasion the charming lady is playing a joke on both of us," suggested Don Carlos lightly. "Let us drink a toast to her together, although we are such deadly rivals."

He slid the decanter across the table invitingly, and Tony helped himself to a drink, still imagining that Don Carlos was jesting, and deciding that Myra had again made him feel "rather an ass."

"Cheerio!" he drawled, raising his glass after Don Carlos had poured himself a drink. "All the best!"

"The toast is Miss Myra Rostrevor, the loveliest and most adorable girl in the world, and may her lover get his heart's desire," cried Don Carlos gaily, and drained his glass.

"Thanks awfully!" said Tony. "It's frightfully good of you, my dear chap, not to take offence, and I feel sure you will be able to win Myra over."

"It is my most ardent desire to win Myra over, my dear Standish," said Don Carlos, as Tony rose to go. "Pray convey to her my most respectful salutations, and beg her to receive me this afternoon."

It was with mingled amusement and exasperation that Myra listened to Tony's account of the interview. She could not help feeling that Don Carlos had turned the tables on Tony, and now had it in his power to make her look ridiculous.

"I think he is the most conceited and impudent man in the world," she commented. "And he's clever! If I refuse to go to Auchinleven, he will tell the world it is because I am afraid of falling in love with him. If you withdraw your invitation to him, he will explain it is because you are afraid he might persuade me to elope with him. He will flatter himself we are both afraid of him, and the affair will become the joke of the season."

"Yes, I realise that, Myra," drawled Tony. "He's got that laugh on us, so to speak, and I think it would be best to save our faces by pretending the whole affair was a sort of practical joke on your part. I don't suppose he'll try to make love to you again, and even if he does you will know he is not in earnest."

"Tony, you duffer, let me assure you he is very much in earnest, and he means to take me from you," said Myra. "And I warn you, my dear, that I should probably have fallen for him and jilted you if he wasn't so inordinately proud of himself and hadn't boasted that he would compel me to love him. As it is, I am not sure that I am not in love with him."

"I say, Myra, you're not pulling my leg again, are you?" asked Tony, tugging at his little sandy moustache and looking worried. "I'm in a frightfully awkward position, as I said before. I like the chap immensely, and I think he's too much of a gentleman to poach—although, of course, foreigners have a

different code of morals from us, and aren't to be trusted where women are concerned. I—er—I don't quite know what to do, but, of course, I'll do anything rather than risk losing you."

There flashed into his mind as he spoke Don Carlos's remark concerning women complaining of another man's attentions in order to bring a husband or a lover "up to scratch," and he had what he would have described as a "brain wave."

"I say, I've got a bright idea, darling," he continued, before Myra could speak. "Let's solve the difficulty by getting married at once. I'll get a special licence, and we'll set a new fashion by entertaining a house party in the Highlands during our honeymoon. Even the boldest man would surely hesitate to make love to another man's wife during her honeymoon. What do you say?"

Myra pursed her red lips and wrinkled her brows in thought, and Tony took her indecision to be a good sign.

"Say 'yes,' darling," he urged. "You know I'm most tremendously in love with you and frightfully keen, and you will have no further reason to feel afraid of Don Carlos when you are my wife."

"I'm not afraid of Don Carlos," snapped Myra. "Oh, Tony, don't be so dense and exasperating! Almost I wish now I had never told you about the tiresome and conceited creature's love-making... Besides," she added, inconsequentially, "I don't want to get married yet, and if I did marry you before we go to Scotland Don Carlos would pride himself it was to protect myself from him, and it would be worse and more dangerous if he made love to me as a married woman. Oh, Tony, my dear, I'm getting mixed, but maybe you understand what I mean. I'm not afraid of Don Carlos, but I don't want to give him any chance of going about boasting that I am in love with him."

"I don't think he would do that, Myra," said Tony. "He seems an awfully decent sort of chap. If you'd heard his explanation, you would understand that he was really only paying us both a compliment by pretending to make love to you. I do hope you'll see him, my dear, and let him explain and apologise. I don't understand why you're so cross with me, darling."

He looked so absurdly pathetic that Myra's irritation gave way to amusement, and her lovely face dimpled into smiles.

"I'm not really cross with you, Tony, my dear, although I do think you have made rather a mess of things," she exclaimed, and gave Tony an affectionate pat on both cheeks. "It will be interesting and amusing to listen to Don Carlos's explanations and apologies—if any... Oh, yes, Tony, I'll see him, and I think I shall manage to take some of the conceit out of him."

As it happened, Lady Fermanagh had an engagement that afternoon, and Myra was alone when Don Carlos de Ruiz was announced. Myra had been doing some hard thinking, and she was feeling sure of herself as she rose to greet her visitor, who bowed low before smiling into her eyes.

"I have called to offer my congratulations, dear lady," he said, in his deep, caressing voice.

"Congratulations? On what, pray?" inquired Myra very coldly. "I understood from Mr. Standish that you were calling to offer apologies for having annoyed me."

"I have come to proffer both apologies and congratulations," said Don Carlos slowly, twin imps of mischief dancing in his laughing eyes. "I have come to tender my most humble apologies for having so far, apparently, failed to melt your icy heart and fire it with the love that burns within me; to congratulate you on being the first woman who has ever taken exception to my making love to her. And to congratulate you, also, on being such an excellent actress."

"Actress? What do you mean?"

"Your pretence of annoyance, dear lady, is such a fine piece of acting that almost I am persuaded you are not in love with me and have steeled your heart against me."

"Please go on being persuaded." Myra's tone was intended to be sardonic. "So far it seems to me you have called to pay yourself compliments instead of to offer apologies. Apparently you explained to Mr. Standish that your love-making was intended as a compliment. Let me tell you, Don Carlos, if that is so I want no more of your compliments."

"If I believed that, sweet lady, life would lose its savour and become but a bleak existence," responded Don Carlos. "I prefer to believe that you love, yet refrain, and that your complaint to your fiancé is an indication that your resistance is weakening, that you fear unless you are able to avoid me you will inevitably surrender to the call of love."

"Your overweening conceit would be laughable if it were not so irritating," Myra retorted curtly. "I want to tell you bluntly that unless you give me your word of honour not to attempt to make love to me I shall refuse to go to Auchinleven if you are to be one of the party, and that will leave Mr. Standish no alternative but to cancel his invite to you—and explain to his friends that his reason is my objection to you."

The smile died out of Don Carlos's eyes, and he regarded Myra gravely and silently for a few moments.

"I promise you I shall not make love to you while we are in Scotland," he said at last. "It will be desperately hard to resist the temptation, but I promise to refrain. And I never go back on a promise."

"Good! In that case we can let bygones be bygones and be friends," exclaimed Myra, and impulsively held out her hand.

Don Carlos raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them, and the boyish smile came back to his face.

"Let me warn you, however, my dear Myra, that although I speak no word of love, my heart and my eyes will be making love to you all the time, and every fibre of my being will be loving you and longing for you," he said. "I shall be planning new ways of overcoming your resistance and inducing you to confess that you love me. Always my heart will be calling and calling to you."

"As long as you do not badger me with your attentions, as you have been doing, it will not concern me what is happening to your heart," remarked Myra, forcing a laugh. "You can even pretend to be heartbroken, if you think the role will suit you."

"No, the role of broken-hearted, rejected suitor would not please me," laughed Don Carlos. "I shall be the strong, silent man, biding his time, confident of eventually gaining his heart's desire. Meanwhile I am congratulating myself on having made it possible to fulfil my boast that I should be your fellow-guest in Scotland for the shooting."

"You have my leave to congratulate yourself as much as you like, Don Carlos, and to hand yourself as many bouquets as you like," said Myra smilingly, "but I shall hold you to your promise not to attempt to make love to me."

"I promise you, Myra, I shall be as silent as a Trappist monk, so far as talking love to you is concerned," Don Carlos assured her. "My promise, however, only holds good for the duration of our stay in the Highlands. After that——"

"Tony and I are going to be married in the Spring," interrupted Myra.

"I think not," said Don Carlos with great earnestness. "You will be mine, dear heart, before the Spring flowers have finished blooming."

"Oh, please don't start being absurd again, just after promising to be sensible!" protested Myra.

"You will be mine, dear heart, before the Spring flowers have finished blooming," repeated Don Carlos. "Sweet lady, you may take that as another promise made in all seriousness. I love you, and I have sworn——"

"Let's change the subject, Don Carlos," interrupted Myra again. "Oblige me by making your promise not to make love to me date from this minute."

"As you will, beloved," said Don Carlos, with an exaggerated sigh; and Myra could not decide whether or not he was laughing.

CHAPTER V

His demeanour as her fellow guest at Tony Standish's shooting lodge at Auchinleven, where he arrived about the middle of August, piqued and perplexed Myra. Not only did Don Carlos keep his promise to refrain from making love to her, but he seemed to avoid her as much as possible, and was only formally polite when they happened to be thrown together.

Yet he made love to practically all the other ladies of the party, and obviously set the hearts of several

of the younger ones fluttering. Myra tried to persuade herself she was thankful to be relieved of his ardent attentions, but at heart she was annoyed to find herself ignored.

"I suppose he is proving that he was only amusing himself and that his fervent love-making was mere pretence," reflected Myra. "He is making my complaint about him seem absurd. Bother the man! I have half a mind to try to make him fall in love with me in earnest, and then take the conceit out of him by telling him I have only been amusing myself at his expense."

What added to her inward vexation was the fact that Don Carlos appeared to have won the good opinion of all the other men of the party, and had completely ingratiated himself with Tony Standish, who constantly talked about him with enthusiasm and spent much time in his company.

"Have you offended Don Carlos in some way, Myra?" Lady Fermanagh inquired one night. "I notice he seems to avoid you as much as possible, and yet he and Tony have become great friends."

"I think Don Carlos is the most exasperating man in the world, aunt, and it is most annoying that Tony should make such a fuss of him after what happened," responded Myra, half-petulantly. "It would serve Tony right if I threw him over. It is exasperating that he is so sure of me that he isn't a bit jealous of Don Carlos, and probably thinks I made a fuss about nothing. Why didn't he half-kill the conceited Spaniard for daring to make love to me? I should have loved him if he had done that—yes, even if he got the worst of it, I should have loved him for trying to give Don Carlos a hiding."

"Don't be absurd, my dear Myra!" protested Lady Fermanagh, laughingly. "I told you that the love-making of men like Don Carlos should not be taken seriously, and it was foolish of you to take offence."

"And now, I suppose, he is laughing up his sleeve at me for having taken him seriously, and thinks he is punishing me by ignoring me for being such a little prude!" said Myra. "Perhaps I did make rather a fool of myself, but I intend to get even with him. Yes, I'll get even with the conceited creature! Do you know what I have decided to do, aunt? I am going to make love to Don Carlos and make him fall in love with me in earnest, just to have the satisfaction of turning him down afterwards and making him feel, and look, a fool."

"For goodness sake don't try to do anything of the sort, Myra," counselled Lady Fermanagh. "Don Carlos is very much a man of the world, and you would be playing with fire. I should judge that he knows women better than most men. And in any case, my dear, it isn't safe to trifle with a Spaniard."

"And it isn't safe to trifle with a Rostrevor Don Carlos de Ruiz will find to his cost," retorted Myra, with a sudden laugh. "My mind is made up, and I shall start on my conquest to-night."

She took special pains over her toilette that evening, and her maid found her unusually exacting. She chose a very decollété evening frock of jade green shot with blue that matched the blue of her eyes but contrasted beautifully with her red-gold hair, and with it she wore a necklace of emeralds and turquoises.

"By Jove! Myra, dear, you are looking lovelier than ever to-night!" exclaimed Tony Standish, admiringly and adoringly, when she went down into the great hall of Auchinleven Lodge before dinner. "You look simply wonderful, darling. Wonderful!"

"Thank you for these few kind words, good sir," Myra answered smilingly, in bantering tones, and dropped a mock curtsey. "I hope Don Carlos will be equally complimentary. You see, Tony, I am afraid he is rather vexed with me for complaining to you about him and snubbing him, so I have decided to let him fall in love with me again and make you furiously jealous."

"Righto!" laughed Tony. "But don't overdo it, old thing, or I may do a bit of the Othello business, don't you know. I believe I could be as fiercely passionate as any Spaniard if I tried."

"Why not try?" responded Myra lightly. "Incidentally, I fancy Othello was a Moor, and not a Spaniard."

"Well, the Moors had something to do with Spain, so it amounts to the same thing. Talking of Spain, Myra, reminds me that Don Carlos has consented to be one of my yachting party for our Mediterranean trip in the winter, and has invited all of us to spend a week or so with him at his place, El Castillo de Ruiz, somewhere in the Sierra Morena."

"Really! That will give me plenty of time to complete my conquest," commented Myra, her blue eyes sparkling mischievously. "I suppose it isn't good form to make a fool of one's host, but Don Carlos will deserve anything he may get."

"I say, darling, I hope you're not in earnest," Tony remarked. "You seem to be in a dangerous mood

to-night, and you look adorably lovely—yes, simply scrumptious! You would fascinate any man, my dear, and I am sure even Don Carlos will be clay in your hands. Don't be too hard on him, Myra. He's an awfully good chap, and I feel sure he didn't mean any harm."

"To-night, my dear Tony, I am a 'vamp,'" laughed Myra. "Just look at Aunt Clarissa over there flirting with Don Carlos, who is probably telling her she is the most accomplished and beautiful woman in the world. Watch me go and cut her out!"

Conscious that she was looking her best (a feeling that gives any woman a sense of power), Myra strolled across the hall to where Don Carlos was chatting to Lady Fermanagh.

"Forgive me if I am interrupting," she said sweetly, smiling into the dark eyes of the Spaniard. "I want to tell you I am so glad to hear from Tony that you are coming with us on the yachting cruise this winter, and I want to thank you for your invitation to El Castillo de Ruiz. I was so afraid you had not forgiven me for being so rude to you, and dreaded lest you had decided to have nothing further to do with such an ungracious person as Myra Rostrevor."

"Sweet lady, I should dismiss such a thought as treason, not to say blasphemy," Don Carlos responded gallantly. "Even when you are ungracious, if ever, you are always the most adorable and beautiful woman in the world."

Myra trilled out a laugh, her blue eyes still smiling at him.

"Thank you, señor, for these few kind words," she said. "I expect you have been saying something of the same sort to my aunt?"

"Yes, Myra, Don Carlos has been telling me that mine is the type of beauty he has always most admired, and that I seem to have discovered not only the secret of perpetual youth, but the art of growing old gracefully," Lady Fermanagh told her smilingly. "I begin to suspect him of being Irish instead of Spanish—for how can one grow old with perpetual youth, I ask you? Still, I confess I like his blarney, and I think it a pity that most Englishmen seem to have lost the knack of paying a compliment, and saying flattering things as if they meant them."

"Dear lady, you do both me and yourself an injustice," exclaimed Don Carlos, his tone very grave but his dark eyes dancing. "The greatest of courtiers, even if he had kissed your famous Blarney Stone, would surely be at a loss for words which would even do justice to your charm, let alone flattering you."

Lady Fermanagh wagged a finger at him.

"My Spanish is getting rusty, señor," she said, "but I think I remember one of the proverbs of your country: '*Haceos miel y comeras han moscas*', which means, 'Make yourself honey and the flies will eat you.' Am I right?"

"Always you are right, dear lady," responded Don Carlos smilingly; "but you leave me undetermined as to whether I am your fly or your honey. Incidentally, we have another proverb, '*En casa del moro no hables algaravia*.' Can your ladyship translate that?"

"Yes, señor," Lady Fermanagh answered, after a moment of thought. "It means, '*Do not speak Arabic in the house of a Moor*,' but I don't know what the application is where we are concerned, unless you are suggesting I have misinterpreted your perfect English, or else you are subtly criticising my imperfect Spanish. You are too deep for me, Don Carlos, and I will leave Myra to try and fathom you. Beware of him, Myra!" she added smilingly, as she moved away.

"I assure you I am absolutely sincere when I tell you, sweet lady, that I am more than charmed to know that you are coming to Spain as my guest, and I promise you I shall do everything that lies in my power to make your visit interesting," said Don Carlos to Myra. "But let me warn you that if El Diablo Cojuelo learns that the most beautiful, adorable, and wholly desirable girl in the world is going to visit El Castillo de Ruiz, he will assuredly make an attempt to kidnap you."

"Is the most beautiful, adorable, and wholly desirable girl in the world going to be one of the party?" inquired Myra, assuming an innocent expression. "How interesting and exciting! Who is she? A film star?"

"She is *you*, señorita," Don Carlos responded, "and let me remind you that El Diablo Cojuelo almost makes a hobby of kidnapping beautiful women. So you will be in danger all the time you are in Spain."

"I refuse to be dismayed—and I don't believe a word of it!" responded Myra, with a silvery laugh. "I don't believe you keep a pet brigand and outlaw on your estate, but even if you do, the prospect of being kidnapped does not dismay me. The risk, if any, will add a spice of adventure to the visit. But I

can't believe you would let any brigand steal me from your castle, Don Carlos, although you have threatened to steal me yourself. Would you?"

"I promise you that El Diablo Cojuelo shall not steal you away from me even if he captures you, señorita," Don Carlos replied. "I am glad you are undismayed, and again I assure you I am honoured and flattered that you have accepted my invitation to——"

"I regarded it more as a challenge than an invitation," interposed Myra.

"Really! Then I am more than honoured by your acceptance of the challenge," resumed Don Carlos, his face crinkling into a smile. "I wonder why you are condescending to be so gracious to me to-night, Myra. Do I understand I am forgiven?"

"Perhaps I have really nothing to forgive, Carlos, and it was folly on my part to take offence," Myra answered, with an alluring glance. "Incidentally, it is nice of you to keep your promise not to make love to me, but—but——"

She broke off as if at a loss. For once in a way Myra Rostrevor was deliberately playing the part of coquette, and she saw Don Carlos's eyes flame suddenly with ardour and expectation.

"You mean that you no longer hold me to my promise, Myra?" he asked, scarcely above a whisper.

"No, I—I don't mean that, Carlos," murmured Myra, with eyes downcast; "but—but you have only been coldly polite to me ever since you arrived here, yet I have seen you making love to other girls. If you are in love with me, and were not merely pretending——"

"I was not pretending, Myra," interrupted Don Carlos. "I love you with every fibre of my being. It was only pretence where the other women are—and were—concerned. I confess I tried to make you feel jealous, and I trust I succeeded?"

"I am not going to tell you," said Myra, raising her eyelids to flash another alluring and provocative glance at him. "Unless there is love, there can hardly be jealousy. If I were desperately in love with a man who did not care for me, or pretended he did not, I should not have the heart to try to make any other man fall in love with me. How can you expect me to believe you are really in love with me, Carlos, when I see you constantly making love to other women?"

"Darling, give me but a chance to prove my love," Don Carlos breathed; then quick-wittedly began to talk about salmon fishing as two or three other guests approached.

Myra did not give him another opportunity to talk to her alone during the rest of the evening, but she contrived to tantalise and puzzle him further, nevertheless. She pleaded tiredness when he asked her to dance after dinner, but danced with other men, and she was unusually affectionate in her manner towards Tony when she thought Don Carlos was watching her, which was often.

"I say, Myra, darlinest, you're looking lovelier and more adorable than ever, and I feel bewitched and enraptured," Tony whispered to her as she took his arm and gave it an affectionate little squeeze after a dance.

"I am trying to make up for being horrid about Don Carlos, Tony dear," explained Myra. "Now I have come to my senses, I am going to let the delightful man make love to me as much as he likes, and play him at his own game... Let's sit the next dance out in the conservatory, Tony."

She had seen Don Carlos wander into the conservatory, and the imp of mischief that possessed her was prompting her to find new ways of teasing and testing him. The conservatory was in semi-darkness, but as Myra entered with Tony she located Don Carlos, for he happened to strike a match at that moment to light a cigarette, before seating himself in a dark corner.

"Let's find a dark corner, Tony," said Myra, and guided her fiancé close to where Don Carlos was sitting—close enough to be sure that the Spaniard would be able to overhear anything she said. "The man who loves me doesn't seem to realise that I want to be kissed," she resumed. "You may kiss me, Tony."

"Darling!" exclaimed the delighted Tony, taking her in his arms and kissing her. "I have been longing to kiss you all evening, sweetheart, but thought you might object even if I got a chance."

"You silly men don't seem to understand that a girl isn't necessarily in earnest if she says she doesn't want to be kissed, or pretends she doesn't want to be made love to," responded Myra, with a little gurgling laugh. "Kiss me again, Tony, but this time kiss me in the way I should love to be kissed by the man who loves me, and not just like a cold-blooded Englishman."

Tony kissed her again, straining her closer, but Myra broke from him as if in sudden alarm.

"There's someone in the corner, Tony," she whispered. "I saw the glow of a cigarette-end. Let's slip out quickly. I hope they didn't see us or hear us, and that they won't rag us later on."

Little guessing that Myra had intended part of what she said should be overheard, Tony, a little bewildered, allowed himself to be rushed out of the conservatory, protesting in an undertone that it didn't matter about being heard or seen, as they were engaged.

For the rest of the evening Myra continued to avoid Don Carlos as much as possible, but she smiled at him in tantalisingly alluring fashion every time their eyes met, wondering as she did so what was in his mind and what effect her coquetry had had upon him. And she went to bed feeling that she had, at least, done something towards justifying her boast that she would make Don Carlos fall in love with her in earnest.

At dead of night she woke suddenly, with the feeling strong upon her that someone, or something, had touched her, but when she sat up in bed and switched on the lights she could see nothing to give her any cause for alarm. Deciding she must have been dreaming, Myra was about to switch off the lights and compose herself to sleep again, when her eyes fell on a folded sheet of notepaper on her pillow. With a sudden intake of breath, she picked up the note, unfolded it, and read:

"The man who loves you will kiss you in the way you would love to be kissed as soon as he is relieved of his promise. Relieve him of his promise, and leave the door of your bedroom unlocked again tomorrow night."

Myra read the note again and again, her mind in something of a tumult, her heart throbbing fast. She knew it must have been written by Don Carlos, and she was dismayed by the thought that he had been in her room.

"There seems to be no limit to the man's daring and impudence," she reflected, and was annoyed to find that she was blushing. "What cheek to suggest that I should relieve him of his promise not to make love to me—and leave my bedroom door unlocked! What infernal, stupendous, insulting cheek! ... Yet I suppose he accepted what I said to Tony as an invitation and a challenge—as I intended. Heavens! if anyone should have seen him leaving my room at this time of the morning, I shouldn't have a rag of reputation left. I should be hopelessly compromised, and it wouldn't be much use producing this letter in the hope of clearing myself. Still, I don't suppose anyone else was prowling about at this time of the night or morning... I wonder if he touched me or kissed me? I wonder if he is really in love with me? I wonder..."

Myra did quite a lot of wondering before she eventually drifted into slumber again, and when she was reawakened by her maid bringing her morning tea, it was to find that she had been sleeping with Don Carlos's note clasped against her breast.

"I suppose the wisest and safest course will be to make no reference whatever to the letter, and to pretend I don't know what he is talking about if Don Carlos has the cheek to refer to it," Myra soliloquised, as she dressed. "After all, I deliberately provoked him, and I should have been disappointed if he had taken no notice. I shall keep the letter and challenge him about it later. Meanwhile I shall hold him to his promise not to make love to me, yet do my utmost to make him break his word. I wonder what will happen if I do make him fall in love with me in earnest. Life is becoming quite an adventure!"

So she made no reference to the letter when by chance she found herself alone with Don Carlos for a time during the course of the afternoon, but continued to exert herself to be "nice" to him. And when Myra Rostrevor set herself out to fascinate, she was an exceedingly alluring and seductive creature. Her sweetness, graciousness, and the inviting and enticing glances of her blue eyes obviously had a strong effect on Don Carlos, and fired his ardour.

"Myra, why are you torturing and tantalising me in this fashion?" he burst out suddenly. "Confess that you love me, darling, and release me from my promise not to make love to you."

"Why, you dear, conceited man, don't you understand it is only because you pledged your word not to make love to me that I am being nice to you?" Myra replied, with her bewitching smile. "If you break your promise, I shall immediately freeze up again and keep you at a distance."

"You are cruel, señorita," commented Don Carlos, with a shrug and a sigh. "You are the most tantalising, puzzling and exasperating girl I have ever met, as well as the loveliest and the most

adorable."

"Really!" laughed Myra. "I wonder you consort with such an annoying person!"

"Consort? Consort? I like that word, Myra," he responded. "I intend to be your consort for the rest of my life, and you shall be my queen and the empress of my heart."

"What a horrible threat!" exclaimed Myra. "And I am afraid, incidentally, it is camouflaged love-making. You must keep to the spirit as well as the letter of your promise, Don Carlos, if you wish to continue on our present footing."

"I am but human, sweet lady, and you are torturing me," said Don Carlos. "I am like unto a man dying of thirst, and you hold a cup of water to my lips, only to snatch it away when I try to drink. But I promise you I shall yet drink my fill from your fountain of love."

"Another dreadful threat—and aren't your metaphors getting mixed again?"

"Myra, darling, I love—

"Remember your promise!" interrupted Myra. "If, as you say, I torture you so horribly, perhaps you would prefer me to avoid you?"

"No, no, a thousand times, no!" Don Carlos cried. "I was desolated when you refused to dance with me last night, and you put me to the torture later in the conservatory. I wanted to murder the other man, the one in particular on whom you bestowed your favours."

"Dear me! What a bloodthirsty creature! Incidentally, are you not still attempting to make love indirectly? I suppose making love has become a sort of second nature, and you do not know you are breaking your promise?"

"I stand rebuked, sweet lady, and crave your pardon," said Don Carlos. "Never yet have I consciously broken a promise. And let me remind you that I have made you several promises."

"Several?" repeated Myra, raising her eyebrows inquiringly.

"Yes, you may remember that the first time we danced together I promised to awaken your heart and fire it with the passion which now consumes me," replied Don Carlos quietly. "I have promised several times since to make you my own, to make you surrender to the call of love and confess yourself conquered."

"Those, I presume, were promises made to yourself," Myra retorted lightly. "We all promise ourselves things, and hope for things, we know at heart we shall never get."

"I have told you it was prophesied that I should get my heart's desire, and also that I have won the reputation of getting anything on which I set my heart."

"As far as I am concerned, you have won the reputation of being the most conceited and audacious man in Europe," commented Myra, turning away from him with a careless laugh.

CHAPTER VI

It was Tony Standish who found himself practically ignored by Myra after dinner that evening, and almost for the first time he began to feel jealous, really jealous, of Don Carlos de Ruiz. Myra danced three times with the Spaniard, and "sat out" two more with him in the conservatory, flagrantly flirting with him, exercising all her powers of attraction and fascination, continually tempting Don Carlos to break his promise.

His dark eyes told her that she had fired his heart and set his pulses throbbing with desire, but no word of love crossed his lips. When they were dancing together, however, more than once he crushed her close to his breast, but Myra did not rebuke him, and several times she squeezed his hand and deliberately brushed his cheek with her hair during a Tango.

"I rather fancy I am going to justify my boast and take my revenge, and Don Carlos de Ruiz will learn to his cost that it isn't safe to trifle with Myra Rostrevor," she reflected. "I suppose I am taking an

unfair advantage, but it serves Don Carlos right."

She was careful to lock and bolt her bedroom door that night before retiring, and she left a light burning and sat up in bed waiting and watching expectantly. Two o'clock chimed, and Myra was beginning to nod drowsily, when a faint sound brought her to sudden wakefulness and alertness. Someone was trying the door of her bedroom! She saw the door-handle turn, and she held her breath and listened intently... The handle turned again ... turned back to its original position.... And that was all.

Listening with thudding heart, Myra could hear no sound from the other side of her locked and bolted door, and the handle did not move again. Slipping out of bed after a few minutes, she stole noiselessly across the room and, dropping on one knee, put her ear to the keyhole and listened, but heard no sound save the throbbing of her own heart.

She could not have explained what she expected, hoped, or dreaded to hear as she crouched there, straining her ears, but it was characteristic of her that suddenly she laughed aloud.

"So he was conceited enough to think that I would leave my bedroom door unlocked!" she whispered, as she went back to bed and switched off the light. "What sort of girl does he take me for? I don't know whether to feel insulted or amused... But I'm glad I didn't forget to lock and bolt the door. I wonder..."

Myra snuggled her head down in her pillow, but scarcely had she closed her eyes when there was a crash against her bedroom door, a shout, and then a shot, and the sound of more shouting. She sprang up convulsively, her hands pressed to her breast, screamed involuntarily, then, recovering herself, switched on the lights, sprung out of bed, unbolted and unlocked the door, and flung it open—to find Don Carlos de Ruiz, clad in pyjamas and dressing gown, engaged in a desperate struggle with a burly, fully-dressed stranger on the floor of the corridor outside her room.

In one swift glance Myra saw that the stranger had a pistol clutched in his right hand, but that Don Carlos had a grip on the man's right wrist and was desperately struggling to prevent his antagonist from using the weapon against him. She screamed again, and even as she did so Don Carlos, by some dexterous twist, got the armed man's elbow across his knee, there was a howl of pain, and the pistol dropped from the fellow's hand.

Quick as lightning Don Carlos released his grip, made a dive for the pistol and got it, then leapt to his feet.

"Now lie where you are, you swine, or I'll kill you," he snarled breathlessly.

"Blast you! You've broken my arm," the man on the floor snarled back at him, writhing in agony. "Blast you! Don't shoot. I surrender... Oh, Gawd! my arm! I wish I'd killed you, damn you!"

While this was happening, doors had been flung open, lights had been switched on, and scared women and startled men had appeared in the corridors from their bedrooms, excitedly demanding to know the cause of the uproar. Tony, in a suit of purple pyjamas, and with his sandy hair on end, was almost the first on the scene.

"What's up? What's happened? Who's this fellow?" he asked breathlessly. "A burglar? Have you shot him, Carlos?"

"No, I think I have merely dislocated his elbow," Don Carlos answered, without taking his eye off the brawny burglar, who was now sitting up nursing his damaged elbow and muttering curses through his clenched teeth. "He tried to shoot me when I surprised him as he was trying to force the door of Miss Rostrevor's room. You'd better 'phone for the police and have the house searched in case he has accomplices."

"You can save yourself the trouble," growled the burglar. "I'm on my own. When you 'phone for the police, ask 'em to fetch a doctor with 'em. You've broken my ruddy arm, damn you!"

"Considering that you did your best to murder me, you dog, you can think yourself lucky that I did not kill you as soon as I got possession of your pistol," retorted Don Carlos, who had recovered his breath.

There was little sleep for anyone at Auchinleven that night. The local Police Inspector and a Constable arrived after a long interval and took the burglar away, after making a search of the house, assisted by the servants, without finding any accomplices of the man in custody.

Next morning, of course, Don Carlos was the hero of the hour, and everyone was lavishing compliments and congratulations on him for having tackled an armed burglar single-handed and getting the better of the desperado.

"I thought I heard someone prowling about in the corridor and got up to investigate," Don Carlos explained. "The fellow seemed to be trying to force the door of Miss Rostrevor's room, and when I challenged him he whipped out a pistol and fired at me. Fortunately for me, he missed, and before he could fire again I grappled with him, managed to get a grip on his arm, and dislocated his elbow by a trick taught me years ago by an old wrestler."

"I wonder why he was trying to force my door, which was locked and bolted, instead of discovering if some of the other doors had been left unlocked," said Myra. "Oddly enough, I fancied I heard someone trying my door some time before I heard the shot. And I still think there was more than one burglar concerned," she added, with a direct and challenging glance at Don Carlos.

"The Police Inspector tells me the man asserts he had no accomplices or confederates," said Don Carlos, his face expressionless. "It is strange, nevertheless, that he should have attempted to force his way into your room in preference to any other."

"Very strange!" agreed Myra. "And how fortunate for me that I should have happened to take the precaution of locking and bolting my door. Oddly enough, I had a sort of presentiment that if I did not bolt my door something dreadfully unpleasant might happen. Normally, you see, I don't bolt the door or lock it. It I do, it means that I have to get up when my maid brings my morning tea. But the night before last I seemed to have a warning, so last night I took precautions against any unwanted visitor. I shall always lock and bolt my door in future."

"Isn't there an old saying that love laughs at locksmiths?" inquired Don Carlos, his expression still sphinx-like, but his eyes twinkling. "You looked delicious in your nightie and boudoir cap, Myra."

"I shall remember to put on my dressing gown next time I am expecting burglars," responded Myra, flushing slightly. "Thank you for saving me, gallant sir."

She was wondering whether it was Don Carlos or the burglar who had tried her door, and she could hazard a guess as to why Carlos had happened to be in the corridor at two o'clock in the morning.

"I am thinking of becoming a burglar myself, dear lady, but please do not wear your dressing gown on that account," laughed Don Carlos.

"I am wondering what might have happened if I had left my door unlocked," said Myra, assuming a thoughtful expression, but avoiding Don Carlos's eyes. "I feel half-inclined to leave it unlocked and unbolted to-night and risk the consequences."

Again, however, she was careful to bolt and lock her bedroom door when she retired that night, but again she sat up in bed, as on the previous night, waiting and watching. And again, in the early hours of the morning, she saw the door handle turn, and she trilled out a laugh, hoping that the would-be "burglar" would hear it.

She continued to exercise her impish arts of tantalisation and her wiles of fascination on Don Carlos during the remainder of her stay at Auchinleven. Sometimes she would seem, metaphorically, to throw herself at his head and appear to be eager to surrender herself, at other times she would completely ignore him, and make open love to Tony in his presence. As time went on she realised that she was driving the Don almost to distraction, and she gloried in her powers.

"I feel certain that I have made him fall in love with me in earnest," Myra reflected triumphantly. "He boasted that no woman could resist him. Women have been his playthings, and he must have fooled many. Now he is being fooled himself. I think he is desperately in love with me now."

She was right in her surmise. Don Carlos's love for her had become a burning, consuming passion. It needed the exercise of all his will power to keep it under control, and continually he had to curb his ardent passion and remind himself of his promise not to make love. But he was biding his time and had made a vow that he would make Myra pay in full for her coquetry.

The house party broke up at length and the guests dispersed, Myra and her aunt returning to London for the "Little Season" and to equip themselves for the winter cruise in Tony's yacht, which was being refitted at Southampton.

Don Carlos had begged to be allowed to call, and both Lady Fermanagh and Myra had said graciously that they would be delighted to see him at any time.

"My thanks to you for having succeeded in keeping your promise," said Myra, as they parted. "Accept my congratulations."

"One reaches Heaven by way of Purgatory," responded Don Carlos cryptically. "I am looking forward eagerly to our next meeting, when I shall be free to express myself."

Expectant, and a trifle apprehensive, Myra awaited events. Nothing happened. A week elapsed without her seeing, or hearing from, Don Carlos, and when she made inquiries about him she learned from Tony that he had returned to Spain.

"Said he had some business matters to attend to, and wanted to arrange for our entertainment at his place out there," explained Tony. "He promised to be back in time to join the yacht at Southampton."

Myra was piqued. It hurt her pride to think she had not made a conquest after all, and had merely been flattering herself in imagining she had made Don Carlos fall in love with her.

"What a fool I feel!" soliloquised Myra. "I was confident he was in desperate earnest and was crazy about me, and I have been wondering how to resist and repel him. He shows how little he cares by going off to Spain without even calling to say good-bye, and with never a farewell note. Oh, what an exasperating creature!"

Another ten days passed uneventfully, and Myra found herself oddly discontented with life and things in general. It was a dismal November afternoon, she had no engagements, and was feeling utterly bored as she took tea alone in the drawing room of her aunt's house in Mayfair, when, to her astonishment, Don Carlos de Ruiz was announced. Her heart gave a convulsive leap at the mere mention of his name, and it was throbbing faster than its wont as she rose to greet him, although she assumed an attitude of cool indifference.

"Sure, and it's seriously annoyed with you, I am, Don Carlos, and you needn't expect me to say I'm glad to see you," she said in her musical Irish voice as she gave him her hand. "How very rude of you to disappear without even a word of farewell. Rude, did I say? Perhaps crude would be a better word. How rude and crude to dash back to Spain to attend to some matter of business when you had been trying to pretend to be hopelessly in love."

"Not 'hopelessly,' Myra," Don Carlos responded quietly, raising her fingers to his lips. "Never have I been 'hopelessly' in love, for always I have been sure at heart that I should win.... So you have missed me, darling, and now your heart is throbbing because I have come back to you? I am glad. I went away without a word in the hope that by so doing I should punish you for your cruelty in tempting and tantalising me as you did at Auchinleven."

"Tempting and tantalising you!" exclaimed Myra, and trilled out a laugh. "And you think, you conceited man, that you were punishing me by going to Spain for a fortnight or so without even having the politeness to say *au revoir*! How very amusing! And how very crude and rude! Didn't you understand I was paying you back in your own coin at Auchinleven by pretending to be in love? So you went away with the idea of punishing me!"

"I found it necessary to return to my home in order to take precautionary measures against the bandit, El Diablo Cojuelo, who is evidently planning fresh mischief," Don Carlos explained. "Now I have come back to you to redeem my promise."

"Your promise?" queried Myra, forcing herself to meet his ardent glance. "I don't understand. What promise?"

"My promise to kiss you in the way you wanted to be kissed by the man who loves you," said Don Carlos quickly; and before Myra realised what was happening she was crushed close to his breast and he was kissing her as she had never been kissed before, hungrily, fiercely, passionately, ardently.

For a few minutes she found herself, in some mysterious way, robbed of all powers of resistance. Don Carlos's lips were crushed on her own, and his burning kisses seemed to be drugging her brain and drawing the very heart out of her. Then suddenly she struggled and broke from him, her lovely face aflame, her bosom heaving tempestuously, her breath coming and going in sobbing gasps.

"How dare you! Oh, how dare you!" she panted. "You brute! You brute! I could kill you!"

She dropped limply into a chair and covered her burning face with her hands. She was trembling, her heart was throbbing as if it would burst, and her brain was in a turmoil. Don Carlos stood silent for a few moments, his dark eyes still aflame with ardour as he looked down at Myra. He, too, was trembling slightly, and a spot of hectic colour glowed on each cheek-bone.

"Why blame or reproach me, Myra darling?" he said at last, his deep voice vibrant. "Remember that

you tempted me, challenged me. It was to me that you spoke, and not to Standish, when you said you wanted to be kissed by the man who loved you, and not by a cold-blooded Englishman. I promised you that night I would kiss you in the way you longed to be kissed, in the way I longed to kiss you, and I have fulfilled my promise—in part. Myra, belovedest, the nectar of your lips has increased my longing a thousandfold. Tell me, darling, that my kisses have fired your heart with the love for which I crave, and ___"

"I hate you, hate you, and I shall never forgive you for this!" burst out Myra passionately, starting to her feet. "Go away at once, and don't dare to come near me again. How dare you, how dare you kiss me like that! If I were to tell Tony—"

She broke off with a sharp intake of breath, for at that moment the butler tapped at the drawing room door and opened it.

"Mr. Standish," he announced; and Tony walked in, as if he were an actor taking his "cue."

Antony Standish could (but didn't) boast of a 'Varsity education, and he prided himself on his smartness, but he was far from being "gleg at the uptak'," as the Scots say, and his powers of observation and deduction assuredly would not have qualified him for a position as a Scotland Yard "sleuth." Seemingly he was quite unconscious of the electrical atmosphere as he entered, and quite failed to notice Myra's agitation.

"Hullo, Don Carlos! What a surprise!" he cried breezily. "How are you, old fellow? ... Hello, Myra, my dear. Thought I'd blow in on the chance of finding you at home this beastly afternoon and cadge a cup of tea.... Where did you spring from, Don Carlos? Thought you were still in Spain. Tremendously glad to see you again, old man. When did you get back? You're looking tremendously fit."

"Thank you," said Don Carlos, forcing a smile as he shook hands. "I got back to London less than an hour ago, and hastened to call on Miss Rostrevor to assure her of my undying regard—and to redeem a promise."

He darted a side glance at Myra, who was nervously biting her lips and trying to compose herself.

"Awfully nice of you, old chap. Glad you're back," drawled the unobservant Tony. "I say, Myra, dear, aren't you going to offer me a cup of tea? I suppose I may smoke as Lady Fermanagh isn't here?"

Myra found herself at a loss to know how to deal with the situation. To tell Tony what had happened would inevitably lead to a painful scene, perhaps even to violence; to refrain from telling him would seem like condoning Don Carlos's conduct. She was torn by conflicting emotions and could not make up her mind how to act. Act, however, she did, in a literal sense, for although her heart was still throbbing wildly and her mind was in a whirl, she managed somehow to assume an almost casual air.

"Why, of course you may smoke, Tony," she said, after ringing the bell and ordering more tea. "I'll have a cigarette myself to soothe my nerves."

"Never noticed any signs of nerves about you, old thing," laughed Tony, as he proffered his case and struck a match to light the cigarette Myra accepted. "Nerves! The risks you have been taking of late in the hunting field have made my blood run cold. The way you took that hedge last week during the run with the Quorn made my heart stand still. Honestly, Myra, I shall be glad when I have you safely aboard the *Killarney*, and we are on our way to Spain."

"I am not going to Spain," said Myra, very abruptly.

"Not going to Spain?" repeated Tony, in surprise.

"No, Tony, I am not going to Spain. Don Carlos has offended me beyond pardon."

"I say, Myra, you're ragging, aren't you?" asked Tony. "I thought you had made it up with Don Carlos. Don't tell me the villain has been making love to you again!"

"Why, of course I have," exclaimed Don Carlos. "I am madly in love with Myra, and it is because she is afraid of falling as desperately in love with me as I am with her, and being forced, in consequence, to jilt you, that she has again decided not to go to Spain. She is afraid of me—and of love."

"What a pair of leg-pullers you are!" chuckled Tony, assuming the whole thing was a jest. "Half the men one meets are in love with Myra, but I refuse to believe she is afraid of any of them."

"Ah, but she is afraid of me, my dear Standish, and you should realise I am your most dangerous rival," Don Carlos said gravely, and again Tony chuckled amusedly. "Perhaps it is not only of me but of

herself, and for herself, that Myra is afraid," Carlos continued, with a challenging glance at Myra, who felt she would like to box his ears and also to shake Tony for being so dense. "The lovely señorita is also afraid of being captured by El Diablo Cojuelo, who would make her an ideal husband."

"I say, that's hardly complimentary, old fellow!" Tony commented. "Sort of *faux pas*, isn't it, to suggest that a brigand would be a better husband for Myra than yours truly, and that Myra is a suitable wife for a brigand?"

"That, of course, depends on the brigand," answered Don Carlos, with a smile. "Of course, if Myra is really scared, and is genuinely afraid to come to Spain lest she should lose her heart——"

"I am afraid of nothing!" interrupted Myra, exasperated beyond measure; and immediately she regretted the impulsive words.

"So you will prove the fact by keeping your promise to come to Spain as my guest?" queried Don Carlos quickly.

"That will depend on whether you know your duty to a guest and your obligations as a host," retorted Myra curtly, and Tony raised his eyebrows, surprised by her unusual rudeness.

"I flatter myself, dear lady, that I have a reputation as a host whose hospitality is boundless," said Don Carlos gravely.

A footman entering with the tea-tray relieved the tension, and Tony began to question Don Carlos about his trip, and to tell him what sport he had been enjoying.

CHAPTER VII

Don Carlos took his leave a few minutes later, leaving Myra and Tony alone together, and again Myra could not make up her mind whether or not to tell her fiancé what had happened. It happened that Tony, as soon as they were alone, became particularly sentimental and wanted to kiss her—a fact which somehow seemed to make the situation still more difficult and complicated.

"I don't want to be kissed, Tony," Myra objected, when her lover tried to embrace her. "I feel as if I never want to be kissed again, and I don't want any love-making. Leave me alone!"

"You certainly are in a queer mood to-day, Myra," Tony commented. "What has upset you, darling? You were quite rude to poor old Don Carlos, and now you are snubbing me. What's the matter, old thing?"

"Oh, Tony, my dear, I—I don't know just what is the matter with me, and I don't know what to do," exclaimed Myra, laughing tremulously and feeling inclined to give way to tears. "I don't understand myself. Oh, why are you so stupid? Why don't you make love to me and force me to kiss you? Why don't you kiss and kiss me against my will?"

"Why, hang it all, Myra, I've just been trying to make love to you and asking you to give me a kiss, and you wouldn't. Now—oh, dash it all, I don't know what to make of you, my dear. You are a most puzzling girl!"

"And you are the most exasperatingly dull man," Myra retorted, still half-laughing, half-crying. "Oh, Tony, my dear, take care of me and love me terribly if you want to keep me. Hold me fast and grapple me to you with hooks of steel, or you will lose me."

She almost hurled herself into Tony's arms, buried her face in his shoulder, and burst into tears. Tony did not know what to make of it at all, and he felt utterly helpless. Agitatedly he patted her on the back and stroked her hair.

"Myra, for heaven's sake don't cry," he said, in what was intended to be a soothing tone. "You make me feel so bally awful. I've never seen you crying before, and I can't make out what is the matter. What on earth has upset you, darling? You're quite hysterical. Hadn't I better ring for your maid, dear?"

Poor Tony did not realise how sadly he was blundering, how sorely he was failing in an emergency.

"Oh, why can't you understand!" burst out Myra passionately. "Why can't you love in the right way?"

Don't pat my head and my back as if I were a pet dog, you ninny! Tony, I—I—oh, I can't bear it!"

She broke from him and rushed from the room, banging the door behind her.

"Well I'm sunk!" muttered Tony, distractedly running his fingers through his sandy hair. "What on earth is a fellow to do in these circumstances? I hope to goodness Myra won't carry on like this after we are married, or I shall never know where I am. I wonder what upset her?"

Troubled in mind, he took his departure, and on his way to his Club he was fortunate enough to meet Lady Fermanagh.

"My dear Tony, all women are more or less creatures of impulse, liable to do the most unexpected and quixotic things," her worldly-wise Ladyship told him, when he had explained what had happened and asked her to advise him what to do. "That is what makes us so interesting. We do not understand ourselves, and if men understood us we should cease to interest or attract them."

"Yes, I suppose so, Lady Fermanagh," agreed Tony, with a disconsolate shake of his head. "But it would be rather awful to marry a woman who puzzled one all the time. I couldn't make Myra out at all to-day, and can't think what can have upset her."

"Remember, dear boy, that Myra is Irish and has the Celtic temperament," said Lady Fermanagh. "Probably someone, or something, had upset her before you called, and you had to suffer for it."

"It wasn't only I who had to suffer," remarked Tony. "Poor old Carlos was there when I blew in, and Myra was snubbing him unmercifully. Between ourselves, Lady Fermanagh, Myra was positively insulting. Don Carlos took it rather well, but I fancy he was upset all the same."

"H'm! So Don Carlos is back?" commented her ladyship, with an inscrutable smile. "That may explain matters. Perhaps it was he who was responsible for Myra's tantrums. But don't worry, Tony. Myra will probably be particularly nice to you if you see her to-night."

"I'm not exactly worried, Lady Fermanagh, but I'm very puzzled," said Standish. "I don't suppose Don Carlos had anything to do with the matter, really, although he did say chaffingly that he had been making love to Myra again and said she was afraid of him. But after he had gone Myra seemed uncommonly annoyed with me for some reason or other, and—er—well, a fellow doesn't know exactly what to do in the circumstances, and I thought you'd be able to give me advice."

"My advice to you, Tony, is to make ardent love to Myra, to woo her as if she had not already promised to marry you," Lady Fermanagh responded. "It is just possible, my dear Tony, if you will forgive my suggesting it, that you have not been playing the part of devoted lover wholeheartedly enough."

"Perhaps so," said Tony, rather ruefully. "Er—the difficulty is that when I try to talk and make love like the chaps do in novels and plays, Myra laughs at me and tells me not to be sloppy. I say, Lady Fermanagh, don't tell Myra I've been talking to you about her. She might be angry. But if you can size things up and give me a hint later as to why she was vexed with me this afternoon I'll be tremendously obliged."

Lady Fermanagh had a very shrewd idea that she could have told him there and then who was the cause of the trouble, remembering well Myra's boast that she would make Don Carlos fall in love with her, and her resentment at his lack of courtesy in going off to Spain without a word of farewell.

"Yes, Tony, I'll do my best to 'size things up,' as you so gracefully put it, and may be able to drop you a hint later," she said.

She did some hard thinking as she drove home, where she arrived to find Myra seated listlessly in an armchair by the fire, an unlighted cigarette between her fingers, and a brooding expression in her blue eyes.

"No, there's nothing really the matter, auntie, and I'm quite well," Myra said, in answer to her ladyship's questions; "but—oh, I can't explain, but I feel fed up with everything. I don't think I shall go to the Cavendish's dance to-night."

"What, or who, has made you suddenly feel 'fed up with everything,' as you put it?" inquired Lady Fermanagh. "You seemed in quite good spirits at lunch-time. I noticed Don Carlos de Ruiz's card in the salver in the hall as I came in. Was it he, by any chance, who upset you, Myra?"

Myra's fair face blushed hotly, and she hesitated before replying.

Then, impulsively, she decided to tell her aunt everything, and did so.

Lady Fermanagh listened in grave—almost grim—silence, and with a troubled look in her fine eyes.

"My dear, do you realise that you have brought this on yourself?" she asked quietly, when she had heard Myra out. "I warned you at Auchinleven that you would be playing with fire, and that it was extremely dangerous to trifle with a Spaniard. You deliberately set yourself out to play the part of siren, to make Don Carlos fall in love with you, and——"

"He had deliberately laid himself out before that to make me fall in love with him, and pleaded that he was only amusing himself when he was challenged," interrupted Myra. "That was an insult, and I wanted my revenge. If he did not expect me to take him seriously, he had no right to take me seriously, no right to take advantage and to kiss me as he did this afternoon. Now you are throwing the blame on me, just as he did himself! Why should there be one law for the man and another for the woman? It isn't fair!"

"My dear Myra, do try to preserve some sense of proportion," said Lady Fermanagh gently. "Admittedly it was quite wrong of Don Carlos to make passionate love to you, knowing you were betrothed to Tony, but, as I have told you repeatedly, he was probably only following the custom of his race and did not expect to be taken seriously in the first instance."

"And is it an unheard-of thing in Spain for a betrothed girl to play the part of coquette, and to flirt with the men who make love to her?" interposed Myra again.

"No, no, not at all, but I need hardly remind you, Myra, that in England that sort of thing simply 'isn't done.' Besides, yours was no mere flirtation. You set out to fascinate and captivate Don Carlos, to make him fall madly in love with you, and you seem to have succeeded. You admit you challenged him to kiss you——"

"He had no right to take what I said to Tony as a challenge, although I confess I said it to tantalise him."

"Humph! If I were your age, as beautiful and attractive as you, and I had dared a man to kiss me, I should feel slighted, to say the least of it, and regard him as a poltroon, if he failed to take up my challenge," commented Lady Fermanagh drily. "You can't mean to say you did not expect Don Carlos to carry out the threat or promise he made in his note, particularly as you made no protest against his having entered your bedroom?"

"I—er—I don't know what I expected," answered Myra, rather weakly. "I mean, I did not intend to give him the opportunity to carry out his threat. And I thought it best to say nothing about the note, because I was afraid to risk a scandal, and I was somehow afraid that Don Carlos would turn the tables on me. Now I have a good mind to tell Tony, and to tell him what happened to-day, and leave him to deal with Don Carlos."

"Do, by all means, my dear—if you want to make shipwreck of your life," retorted Lady Fermanagh, sardonically. "Tony will be flattered to find you were playing him off against Don Carlos at Auchinleven. And perhaps not! He may decide, on reflection, that a girl who makes love to another man, or, if you prefer it, encourages another man to make love to her, during her engagement and in the house of her fiancé, might do something of the same sort after marriage in the house of her husband."

"Tony wouldn't be such a beast," exclaimed Myra. "If he dared to blame me, I'd break off my engagement and marry Don Carlos, if only to spite him."

"Humph! And supposing, after breaking off your engagement, you found that Don Carlos did not want to marry you, what a fool you'd look and feel!" responded her aunt. "My dear Myra, don't you realise that if the facts were known the world would condemn you for attempting to play fast and loose with both Tony Standish and Don Carlos de Ruiz, and the general verdict would be that it served you right to be left in the lurch. Tony would be quite justified in throwing you over, and by the time the gossips had finished your reputation would be—well, rather the worse for wear."

"Aunt Clarissa, you don't really think Tony would throw me over if he knew?" asked Myra anxiously, after a thoughtful pause. "Why, I told Tony at Auchinleven that I intended to flirt with Don Carlos and make him fall in love with me, but he would not take me seriously. I told him I meant it and was in earnest, but he only laughed. It is really all his fault. And he was so obtuse this afternoon. Surely he might have guessed what had happened."

Lady Fermanagh sat silent for a full minute, then suddenly she rose and laid her hands on Myra's shoulders.

"Myra Rostrevor, answer me truthfully," she commanded, with a searching glance. "Are you, or are you not, in love with Don Carlos?"

"I—I don't know," Myra answered, shaking her head distractedly. "I think I hate him, but if I could believe he was really sincere and in earnest I think I should love him. If I had been tempting, teasing, and tantalising him to-day, as I did when we were at Auchinleven, I could excuse him for losing his head and kissing me. To-day I didn't give him the slightest encouragement. He had shown his indifference by going away without even a word of farewell, and I suppose he kissed me in cold blood merely to fulfil his threat and his boast that he always keeps a promise."

"Cold-blooded kisses can hardly be very shocking, I should imagine," remarked Lady Fermanagh drily.

"They were not cold-blooded. He kissed me ravenously, passionately, and almost stifled me. I felt as if he were drinking the heart out of me," said Myra. "If I was sure he is as frantically in love with me as he professes to be, I could excuse him, and I might find myself falling in love with him. It is the thought that he may still only be amusing himself, gratifying his vanity and trying to make good his boast that no woman can resist him, that galls me. If I confessed myself in love with him, and he then told me he had merely been amusing himself and proving his power, I should die of shame."

"Why take the risk, Myra? You have been playing with fire, and the dice are loaded against you. That is an Irishism and a mixed metaphor, I suppose, but you know what I mean. If you lose your heart to Don Carlos de Ruiz, you lose Antony Standish, and if you subsequently discover Don Carlos is not in earnest you will be left broken-hearted, humiliated, and with your matrimonial prospects ruined."

"I have no intention of breaking my heart about Don Carlos, and don't intend to make a fool of myself, if that is what you mean," said Myra, with a sudden change of manner. "I said I'd fool Don Carlos to pay him out for asserting he had only been amusing himself with me, and I'll do it yet—if I have not already done it. If he is actually in love with me, I have the laugh on him now, in spite of what has happened."

"Myra, for goodness sake be sensible!" counselled Lady Fermanagh. "If Don Carlos is actually in love with you and you make mock of him, his love may turn to hate. And I warn you that the hatred of a Spaniard is even more dangerous than his love."

"Pooh! I'm not afraid of him, and I don't understand why I have been upsetting myself so much," exclaimed Myra, impulsively starting to her feet. "I'll get even with him. I'll go to the Cavendish's dance after all. Don Carlos is almost sure to be there, and I may get an opportunity to punish him for his impertinence."

"Myra, I do wish you would drop this folly," said her aunt. "You must realise you are running grave risks and imperilling your own happiness. It seems to me, my dear, that as well as trifling with Don Carlos, you are trifling with your own heart, and you are not playing fair with Tony."

"I mean to get even with Don Carlos," Myra responded, stubbornly, with an impatient toss of her red-gold head. "It will be amusing to see the man who boasted that no woman could resist him chagrined and broken-hearted because Myra Rostrevor has laughed at him and made his boasts seem foolish."

"You have had your warning," exclaimed Lady Fermanagh abruptly. "Don't expect any sympathy from me if you get burnt as a result of playing with fire."

She swept out of the room, and as the door closed Myra made a moue, flung herself down in the armchair again, and lit her cigarette.

"Damn him!" she said fervently.

CHAPTER VIII

So many people had been invited to the Cavendish ball that there was scarce room to dance. Myra caught sight of Don Carlos several times, and her heart beat a trifle fast when at last she saw him making his way through the crowd towards her during an interval.

"May I have the pleasure and honour of dancing the next with you, Miss Rostrevor?" he inquired, with his usual courtly bow. "The floor is becoming less crowded now the news has gone round that supper is

being served."

Myra's first impulse was to snub him, but she refrained, rose without a word as the music re-started, and they glided round together to the lilting refrain of the band. Both were extremely graceful and accomplished dancers, and several other couples ceased dancing to watch them, giving them the centre of the floor.

"Are you afraid to look at me, cara mia?" whispered Don Carlos, after a few minutes. "I want to look deep into your dear blue eyes and try to read what is in your heart."

"I am afraid the result would be a shock to your overweening vanity, Don Carlos," responded Myra coldly, still avoiding his eyes. "I am very angry with you, and I am surprised you should have had the audacity to ask me to dance with you before even attempting to offer any apology for your outrageous behaviour of this afternoon."

"Dear, darling, delicious, delectable lady, why should I apologise for taking up your challenge and redeeming my promise?" Don Carlos asked. "Why profess to be offended with the man who loves you so passionately for taking a few of the kisses for which he was craving and hungering? What is it your great Shakespeare wrote that fits our case? ... Ah! I have it! ..."

He sang the words softly, fitting them to the rhythm of the air the dance-band was playing:

*"A thousand kisses buys my heart from me;
And pay them at your leisure, one by one.
What are ten hundred touches unto thee?
Are they not quickly told and quickly gone?
Say for non-payment that the debt should double;
Is twenty hundred kisses such a trouble?"*

"Oh, you are an utterly outrageous and impossible man!" exclaimed Myra, half-annoyed, half-amused, and at heart a little fascinated withal. "Even if I did flirt with you at Auchinleven to amuse myself, you had no right to take my teasing seriously—you, who are such an experienced flirt and philanderer, and who do not expect women to take your love-making seriously and laugh at them if they do."

"I expect you to take my love-making seriously, Myra," he answered.

"Your expectations will not be realised, Don Carlos, and if you attempt to repeat your conduct of to-day there will be trouble," said Myra, forcing herself to meet his ardent eyes unflinchingly. "It is unsportsmanlike to try to excuse yourself by throwing the blame on me, pleading, like Adam, 'The woman tempted me.' You might at least express regret for your conduct."

"I have no regrets, Myra," murmured Don Carlos. "I have tasted the nectar of your lips, and now I hunger for a banquet of love."

"In that case you will surely die of starvation," said Myra, with a light laugh.

"Dios! how you torture me, Myra!" muttered Don Carlos frowningly. "I hoped you would tell me you had found your heart, that my kisses had at last awakened it. I love you, love you with every fibre of my being, and you—you love, yet you refrain."

"Quoting Henley, aren't you, Don Carlos, and trying the effect of pathos by way of a change?" retorted Myra. "How amusing! As far as I am concerned, you can 'break your heart on my hard unfaith and break your heart in vain...' Don't grip my hand so tightly. You are hurting me."

"I will hurt you if you are trifling with me and making mock of my love," said Don Carlos quickly, through clenched teeth. "Don't try me too far, Myra. Beware lest my love turns to hate!"

"Beware lest my love turns to hate!" mimicked Myra, and trilled out a laugh. "You are talking like a character in an old-fashioned melodrama. Should I play up to you by crying, 'Unhand me, villain,' turning deathly pale, and screaming for help. Don't be absurd! ... We won't dance the encore. But if you will promise to be sensible and refrain from talking extravagant nonsense, you may take me in to supper."

She felt certain that she had both hurt and puzzled Don Carlos, and she gloried in the thought, flattering herself that she was really taking her revenge. She was completely mistress of herself again, sure of her own powers, and during supper she laid herself out to be "nice," with almost devastating effect, playing on the emotions of the Spaniard like a skilled musician on a sensitive instrument. Deliberately she encouraged him, only to rebuff him when she had inflamed his ardour, deliberately she

set herself to excite his passions, only to reward him with a cold douche of ridicule.

"I believe the man is actually in love with me," Myra soliloquised, smiling in self-satisfied fashion at her reflection in the mirror as she undressed that night. "He was grinding his teeth in sheer mortification and looking quite murderous when I told him he was boring me, and I went off with Tony. Yes, I think I am taking my revenge. What a triumph if I find myself able to twist round my little finger, so to speak, the man who boasted no woman could resist him!"

Yet when she fell asleep she dreamed that she was again in the arms of Don Carlos with his lips crushed on her own, and that she was returning his passionate kisses with fervour and straining the Spaniard close to her heart although Tony (in her dream) was looking on, feebly begging her to desist and to kiss him instead, and Lady Fermanagh was standing by protesting in solemn tones that she was "playing with fire."

"What an utterly absurd dream!" Myra reflected, when she woke with her heart thrilling queerly. "I wonder what particular and peculiar kink in my mental outfit made me enjoy kisses in my dreams which I hated while I was awake? How flattered Don Carlos would be if he knew!"

An hour or so later she chanced to encounter Don Carlos while she was taking her morning gallop in the Row, and he brought his horse abreast of hers, saluting in his usual gallant manner.

"You tortured me last night, Myra, but in my dreams I got full recompense," he said, after formal greetings.

"Really! How fortunate for you!" drawled Myra, with well-feigned lack of interest. "Do you flatter yourself even when you are asleep?"

"It was an extremely vivid dream, Myra," continued Don Carlos, ignoring the jocular question. "I dreamed you were in my arms, straining me close to your breast, and returning my hungry kisses with passionate ardour. We were drinking Love's cup of rapture together, my beloved and I, giving and taking all."

With her own dream still vivid in her memory; Myra was startled. Her heart seemed to miss a beat, she felt the hot colour rush to her face, and she bent forward to stroke her horse's neck lest her expression might betray her if she met Don Carlos's eyes.

"How utterly preposterous!" she commented. "However, it is said that dreams are contrary. Incidentally, I meant what I said when I told you I should refuse to talk to you if you persisted in being sentimental. Good morning!"

Being Irish, Myra Rostrevor was by nature more than a little superstitious and inclined to attach some importance to dreams and omens, and she rode away feeling just a tiny bit scared at heart, and wondering uneasily if perchance Don Carlos de Ruiz was a thought-reader.

"Sure, and I don't know what to make of you, Myra," she whispered to her own reflection in the mirror, as she changed from her riding costume into a morning frock. "I don't know what to make of you at all, at all! And I don't know what to make of Don Carlos, either. I don't know if you are in love with him or not, and I'm not sure but what if he kissed you again you might make a fool of yourself and give up the idea of making a fool of him.... Oh, if only I knew whether he is in earnest or not!"

Myra was almost afraid to attempt to analyse her own feelings and emotions, and could come to no decision concerning either herself or Don Carlos. She continued to "blow hot, blow cold" every time they met, sometimes treating him with studied coldness, at other times flirting with him beguilingly, but always taking precautions against giving him any opportunity to kiss her again.

Meanwhile Tony Standish had taken Lady Fermanagh's advice, and he was wooing Myra with all the fervour and passion of which his somewhat phlegmatic nature was capable, wooing her as if their betrothal was yet to be, instead of an accomplished fact. Hardly a day passed but he brought or sent some expensive trifle, together with flowers, chocolates, or cigarettes, with assurances of his undying affection.

His tributes of devotion made Myra feel just a trifle guilty, made her wonder, too, if Tony had decided that the love-making of Don Carlos was something more than make-believe, and he was trying to make sure of her.

"Oh, Tony, dear, you make me feel as if you were buying me!" she exclaimed one afternoon, when her lover presented her with a diamond pendant. "Why have you given me such lots of presents lately, you

extravagant old thing?"

"Well, darling, I want to show you how much in love with you I am," answered Tony, looking quite bashful. "I am tremendously in love with you, Myra, honour bright, and I'd do anything to prove it. I'd—I'd give my life for you, sweetheart. Honestly, it would break my heart if I lost you."

"Tony, what makes you talk of losing me?" Myra asked quickly.

"Oh—er—nothing, really, but—er—well, you're so beautiful, and fascinating, and attractive, and all the rest of it, and I know there are several men who are in love with you and would like to cut me out if they could," explained Tony. "I say, dear, I don't mean that I think you'd let me down and go back on your promise to marry me. Er—you weren't in earnest, were you, darling, when you talked about letting Don Carlos fall in love with you at Auchinleven, and making me jealous? Please don't mind my asking, but I'm rather worried, to tell the truth."

"Worried because you think I may be in love with Don Carlos?"

"No, Myra, not exactly, but because I know he is in love with you. He told me so himself last night."

"He told you so himself!" exclaimed Myra, startled.

"Yes. Placed me in a rather difficult position. I suppose it was really rather sporty of him. I don't know if I should tell you. He called on me and said he was afraid he'd have to ask me to release him from his promise to be my guest on the yachting tour. Naturally I asked him why, and he told me frankly that he had fallen in love with you."

Myra's heart beat a trifle faster as she listened.

"Said he thought it was only right I should know, and that he supposed it wouldn't be playing the game according to English ideas if he made love to you and tried to win you from me while he was my guest," continued Tony. "I didn't know quite what to say, except that I was sorry."

He looked at Myra expectantly and a little anxiously as he paused, and Myra laughed involuntarily. But her heart was still behaving rather oddly and she felt her face flushing.

"How absurd, Tony!" she exclaimed. "Do you think he was in earnest?"

"Oh, yes, he seemed to be in deadly earnest," replied Tony. "Er—I didn't quite know what to do about it, as I said before, but it suddenly occurred to me that if I let Don Carlos withdraw his acceptance of my invitation it might seem like an admission that I had not complete faith in you and was afraid of losing you. You see what I mean, Myra?"

"More or less," said Myra, rather bewildered. "But surely you don't mean that you pressed him to come, knowing he would go on making love to me?"

"I didn't exactly press him, but I told him that if he felt he must decline my invitation because he was in love with you, we should naturally have to decline his invitation to Spain for the same reason," responded Tony. "I told him he ought to have known you were only amusing yourself to pay him out, and that he should have known better than lose his heart after you had objected to his attempting to make love to you. So eventually he laughed and said if I wasn't afraid of him as a rival he would come. I hope you don't mind, darling. I told him he hadn't an earthly hope."

"It is nice to know you are so sure of me that you have no fear of a rival," commented Myra drily, after a momentary pause.

"I say, Myra, do you mean that, or are you being sarcastic?" asked Tony. "What could I do in the circumstances? Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned the matter to you at all, but—er—I thought you might feel rather flattered to know that you have made another conquest, and you know you said you weren't in the least afraid of Don Carlos. I thought, too, that you'd take it rather as a compliment if I showed I had complete faith in you. You didn't really want me to display jealousy, did you?"

"I don't know, Tony," replied Myra evasively. "If the positions were reversed and I were engaged to Don Carlos and you had been making love to me, I expect he would have killed you by now, and perhaps strangled me into the bargain."

"Englishmen don't do that sort of thing," remarked Tony, looking hurt. "If you mean you would prefer me to behave like an emotional foreigner—"

"Oh, Tony, dear, don't be absurd!" interrupted Myra, her mood changing. "I see how you looked at the matter, and I know I should be glad you have such faith in me. But don't you think Don Carlos may

regard your indifference to his rivalry as being almost in the nature of a challenge?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way, Myra, but in any case I know you'll be able to keep Don Carlos at a distance if he should try to make love to you again," answered Tony. "Sure you're not vexed with me, dear?"

"I don't know whether I'm vexed or pleased, amused or scared, but I am certainly thrilled," said Myra. "To think that Don Carlos, who boasted that no woman could resist him, should confess to you, that he has lost his heart to me!"

"I couldn't help feeling rather sorry for the poor chap," remarked Tony. "I should feel ghastly if I had fallen in love with you after you had become engaged to another man, and knew there was no hope."

"Don't be too sure there is no hope for Don Carlos," said Myra provocatively; but Tony's look of piteous dismay caused her to relent almost instantly, and she kissed him.

Long after Tony had gone, Myra sat lost in thought, her heart still thrilling. Don Carlos's confession was, of course, a compliment and tribute to her powers of fascination, and naturally Myra was flattered; but she was also more than a little puzzled.

She could not quite fathom Don Carlos's motive for telling Tony Standish he was in love with her, and she realised that Tony had been cleverer than he knew. By telling her of Don Carlos's confession and assuring her that he had complete faith in her he had, as it were, placed her on her honour not to forsake him.

"I wonder what wise Aunt Clarissa would advise?" mused Myra. "I must tell her that although she said I was playing with fire it is Don Carlos, apparently, who has got burnt."

"You certainly appear to have reason to flatter yourself on your success as a coquette, Myra," commented Lady Fermanagh drily, after listening attentively to Myra's story of Don Carlos's confession to Tony, and, incidentally, without making any mention of the fact that she had already heard the story from Tony himself over the telephone. "You have the laugh on Don Carlos de Ruiz now, my dear, but don't forget the old proverb that he who laughs last laughs best. Actually, it is not a laughing matter at all, but a crime to break a man's heart in jest."

"You don't really suppose that Don Carlos is heart-broken, do you, Aunt?" asked Myra.

"Frankly, I do not," responded Lady Fermanagh. "I don't quite know what to make of it. My idea is that Don Carlos probably guessed you had boasted you would make him fall in love with you, and he may either be pandering to your vanity by leading you to believe you have succeeded in your object, or else trying to make a fool of you. Be careful, my dear! It isn't safe to trifle with men of the type of Don Carlos de Ruiz, as I have told you before."

"Pouf! If he has actually fallen in love with me, he is more likely to make a fool of himself than of me," Myra exclaimed.

"One never knows," Lady Fermanagh responded. "I believe you are half in love with him as it is, Myra, and if he cared to exercise all his powers he might be able to induce you to break with Tony."

Myra shook her red-gold head, but at heart she knew her aunt might be right.

"Your idea, as you have admitted, was to make Don Carlos fall in love with you in earnest, because he had made love to you in jest," continued Lady Fermanagh. "You wanted to have the satisfaction of 'turning him down'—to use the ultra-modern expression—and laughing at him for losing his heart. Take care, my dear Myra, that he does not turn the tables on you again."

"How could he?" asked Myra, feeling somewhat piqued.

"Well, it might amuse him to protest that he is heart-broken, to persuade you to take pity on him and forsake Tony, to confess yourself in love with him, and then in the end to remind you of his boast that no woman could resist him, and explain that he did not want you, had merely been testing his powers and taking revenge for your coquetry."

"Surely, he wouldn't be such a beast!"

"He might—and more particularly if he is in earnest," said Lady Fermanagh gravely. "No man likes being laughed at, except when he is appearing on the stage as a comedian. A man in love is particularly sensitive to ridicule. I wonder how many murders have been committed in Spain as a result of girls

inducing men to make fools of themselves?"

"Oh, Aunt, don't be absurd!" interposed Myra. "Are you suggesting that Don Carlos may murder me? Do you anticipate his plunging a stiletto or some sort of Spanish dagger into my heart, or committing suicide on our nice clean doorstep, because I do not reciprocate his passion?"

She trilled out a laugh and her aunt had, perforce, to smile.

"One never knows," she said again. "My advice to you is not to take any further risks, and not to attempt to gloat over Don Carlos. And I think you should fix the date for your marriage to Tony Standish and make a good resolution to break no more hearts."

"And join a Dorcas society, and wear flannel next the skin, and woollen stockings and flat-heeled shoes!" Myra added frivolously. "Thank you *so* much, Aunt Clarissa!"

CHAPTER IX

Sure of her own powers, but uncertain of her own heart, Myra could not make up her mind in advance what attitude to adopt towards Don Carlos at their next meeting, and wondered what his attitude would be towards her. Would he profess to be heart-broken, or continue to make passionate love to her at every opportunity?

She was left wondering, for Don Carlos left London that very day, after explaining to Tony that he had been called to Paris on important business.

"Said he might be away for a week or two, but promised he would make a point of getting back in time to join our yachting party," Tony informed Myra. "Just as well, perhaps, what? Give him time to get over having fallen in love with you, darling. Asked me to give you his humble and dutiful regards—I believe that was his expression—and to assure you he never broke a promise. I suppose he meant his promise to be back in time to join us at Southampton."

"I suppose so," Myra equivocated. "I don't believe he is in love with me, Tony."

"I don't see how anyone could help being in love with you, darling," responded Tony gallantly. "My idea is that poor old Carlos is hard hit, and has probably gone to Paris to pull himself together, so to speak, and to avoid meeting you for a bit."

"Paris is so consoling!" commented Myra satirically. "Just the sort of quiet, soothing place where a heart-broken lover can find solace! I shall waste no sympathy on Don Carlos."

She was piqued and puzzled, and a little exasperated by the thought that Don Carlos was playing a joke on her.

"He probably thinks I am deeply in love with him, and flatters himself I shall be hurt and grieved by his sudden departure," reflected Myra. "Perhaps he thinks he is paying me back in my own coin, and he will find me ready to fall into his arms, so to speak, on his return. If so, I can promise him a disappointment."

She tried to put Don Carlos out of her mind, but she found herself thinking of him continually. Often in her dreams she was again enfolded in his arms with his lips crushed on her own, and she would wake with her heart throbbing wildly.

Tony never managed to set her heart throbbing in the same way. Myra wished he could and would. Perhaps it was her dreams of Don Carlos that caused her to be particularly nice to Tony during the next week or two, and to try to persuade herself that she was really in love with him.

No word came from Don Carlos, but he duly presented himself aboard the *Killarney*, Tony Standish's yacht, on the appointed day. And he looked as little like a heart-broken, forlorn lover as anyone could imagine. Indeed, he seemed to be in exceptionally high spirits, talked gaily of the enjoyable time he had had in Paris, explaining that he had combined business with pleasure.

He made no attempt to speak to Myra alone on the first night aboard, and joined a party of men playing poker in the smoking-room, in preference to dancing.

"He is really the most baffling and exasperating creature," Myra told herself. "I expect he thinks he is vexing me by being so casual, the conceited fellow. I am annoyed with myself for feeling annoyed."

She encountered Don Carlos next morning, when she went up on deck from her state room to take a stroll before breakfast, and he greeted her smilingly.

"Buenos dias, señorita," he said, with a gallant bow. "I start the day well by meeting you, my Myra. Has absence made your heart grow fonder, my heart's desire?"

"Yes, I am fonder of Tony than ever," answered Myra lightly. "I think I really ought to thank you, Don Carlos, for pretending to Tony that you had fallen in love with me. I was vastly amused, but Tony actually took you seriously, and he has been the most adorably devoted lover ever since. I am half inclined to suspect that you must have given Tony some lessons in love-making!"

Don Carlos flashed a searching glance at her, and his smile faded.

"If I thought that Standish would hold you to your promise to marry him, knowing that you love me, I should kill him," he said, quietly, calmly and deliberately.

"In that case, Tony is a doomed man," commented Myra, with a mocking laugh. "But perhaps the fact that I do not love you will induce you to spare his life," she added hastily. "Don't you find it rather difficult to be melodramatic and to talk farcical nonsense before breakfast, Don Carlos?"

"I am debating with myself how best to get rid of Standish," responded Don Carlos unsmilingly. "An opportunity may present itself during this cruise. I do not wish to kill him, and would much prefer him to surrender you to me voluntarily. But if he is obstinate, and if you persist in refusing to obey the dictates of your heart to break with him, he, as you have said, is a doomed man."

So earnest was his tone, so serious his manner, that Myra felt her heart contract, but she forced herself to treat his speech as a joke.

"Don Carlos, you are an impossible person!" she exclaimed. "Do you want me to rush away and warn Tony that his life is in danger? Shall I ask the captain to order two of the crew to play the part of Scotland Yard detectives, shadow your every movement and keep guard over Tony? You don't really expect me to take you seriously, do you?"

Before Don Carlos could answer, Tony, together with two or three other members of the party, came up the companion-way.

"Hallo, people, what are you looking so solemn about?" cried Tony cheerily. "Not feeling sea-sick, are you, what?"

"Good morning, darling, so glad you've come," said Myra, and tilted up her face for a kiss. She seldom greeted her betrothed with a kiss if there were others present, but she guessed the display of affection might annoy Don Carlos. "This dreadful man has been trying to make my blood run cold," she added smilingly, with a challenging glance at Don Carlos. "I think he must have spent most of his time in Paris at the Grand Guignol, and it has turned his brain. I'm afraid he is suffering from some sort of homicidal mania, poor fellow."

"I warn you, good people, and you, mine host in particular, that I am in a murderous mood," said Don Carlos gaily. "Miss Rostrevor has driven me insane, and I may go Berserker at any moment."

"Splendid, old chap!" laughed Tony. "What about attacking the breakfast with savage fury? There goes the gong...."

It was a beautifully calm day, and after breakfast most of the company assembled on the promenade deck, some to lounge and smoke and chat or read, others to play quoits or deck billiards.

For once in a way Myra did not feel particularly energetic, and she sat down on a comfortable deck chair beside her aunt and several other women and girls seated in a group gossiping and exchanging badinage with two or three men of the party standing by their chairs or lounging against the rail.

Tony Standish and Don Carlos were standing together, both leaning against the rail, and Myra lay back in her chair with her hands clasped behind her head, studying and comparing them through half-closed but keenly-observant eyes.

She noticed that as Don Carlos talked and laughed he was fingering a bolt under the rail behind him, saw him slide the bolt back, and she was in the act of sitting up and calling out to him to be careful, to point out that the part of the rail against which he and Tony were leaning was that which is swung open

to make way for a gangway, when Don Carlos straightened himself and took a pace forward.

The rail swung loose at the same instant, and Tony, who had been leaning heavily against it with his arms folded, was precipitated backwards into the sea!

Screams of horror and consternation broke from all the women, and Myra sprang to her feet and made a dash towards the side of the yacht. Whether or not she intended to fling herself into the sea in the hope of rescuing Tony, she could not afterwards have told. As it was, Don Carlos seized her, hurled her aside, and flung off his coat.

"Man overboard!" he yelled at the top of his powerful voice, and as he did so he dived overside.

His cry was heard and repeated instantly by several of the crew. There was a clang of bells in the engine room as the chief officer on the bridge shot over the indicator, signalling "Full Speed Astern," at the same time shouting orders that sent men racing to swing out a boat from the davits, while others ran with life-buoys to the stern of the vessel, ready to fling them to the men in the water if the opportunity presented itself.

The *Killarney* had been going full speed ahead when Standish went overboard, and at first Myra, when she began to recover her scattered wits, could see no trace of either Tony or Don Carlos. Then she glimpsed a black head, and saw Don Carlos swimming strongly towards a fair head, which she knew was Tony. A pair of hands shot up and the fair head disappeared just when Don Carlos had almost reached it, and a sob of anguish broke from Myra's white lips.

"He's gone down! He's drowning!" she gasped, and as the words passed her lips Don Carlos also disappeared—to reappear, however, a minute later, swimming on his back and supporting Tony.

He seemed to be having difficulty in keeping afloat, and it seemed to all those anxiously watching that he might go under before help could reach him. Again the engine-room bells clanged, and this time the signal from the bridge was "Stop"; the boat, fully-manned, was lowered with a run, and at the same time one of the sailors at the stern of the yacht slung a lifebuoy overside with such force and accuracy that it hit the water with a splash within ten yards of Don Carlos, who propelled himself towards it, and with its aid succeeded in supporting himself and Tony until the boat reached him and he and Tony were safely hauled aboard.

Orders were shouted from the bridge, sailors scurried to let down the accommodation ladder and stood by with ropes, awaiting the return of the boat, which was being rapidly rowed back to the *Killarney*.

The boat came alongside at last, and Tony, who appeared to be exhausted and almost unconscious, was with difficulty hoisted up the ladder to the deck, where the ship's doctor was already waiting with restoratives.

Someone started a cheer as Don Carlos, dripping wet but smiling, came up the ladder, and the cheer was taken up by practically everyone around, save Myra, who was standing tense and white, her brain in a turmoil.

"Bravo, Don Carlos, bravo!" shouted an excited and enthusiastic youngster, rushing forward and trying to shake Don Carlos's hand; but Don Carlos waved him off with an impatient frown and bent over Tony, who had opened his eyes and was making an effort to sit up.

"Is he all right, doctor?" he asked.

"Yes, I think he is only suffering from shock, sir," the doctor answered, unfastening Tony's collar, which seemed to be choking him.

"Thanks," gasped Tony faintly and painfully. "I—I'll be all right presently. Think I must have hit my head on something. Give me a drink, will you?"

The doctor gave him brandy, had him carried to his cabin, where he examined him carefully and discovered that he was not injured. He surmised that Tony had probably been partly stunned by falling flat on the water when he toppled overboard, and "knocked silly"—to use Tony's own expression—and he was able to tell the passengers that their host would probably be all right again within an hour or two.

"Thank heaven for that!" exclaimed Lady Fermanagh fervently. "Myra, darling, you look ghastly. Doctor, please give Miss Rostrevor something to pull her together."

"I'm quite all right, thanks," said Myra—and promptly disproved her own statement by dropping

limply into a deck-chair, covering her face with her hands, and bursting into tears.

She speedily recovered herself, however, after she had been helped to her state-room and persuaded to swallow some sal volatile, but she still felt shaken and unnerved.

"Better lie down and rest for a little while until you have quite recovered from the shock, Myra dear," advised Lady Fermanagh. "Don't worry. You heard the doctor say that Tony will be quite all right and isn't hurt."

"I don't understand it," said Myra, more to herself than to her aunt. "Don Carlos meant to kill Tony, and yet he saved him. Does he want to make himself out to be a hero simply to flatter still further his own vanity, or is he trying to frighten me?"

"My dear Myra, what on earth are you talking about?" inquired Lady Fermanagh in concern.

"Don Carlos undid the bolt of the rail against which Tony was leaning," explained Myra. "I saw him do it, but had no time to warn Tony. He threatened this morning that he would murder Tony rather than let me marry him. What can I do, Aunt?"

Lady Fermanagh shook her grey head, looking greatly concerned.

"I heard Don Carlos say something about being in a murderous mood, and perhaps the accident to Tony was only an unfortunate coincidence," she said.

"It was not an accident, Aunt," insisted Myra. "I tell you I saw him slip back the bolt that holds the rail."

"But that may have been accidental, Myra," suggested her aunt. "Don Carlos was talking at the time, and he may not have realised what he was doing. You know how often one fiddles with something while one is talking or thinking. Why, you are twiddling your necklace now, Myra, without knowing you are doing it, and a minute ago you were twisting your engagement ring round and round your finger. If Don Carlos had been in earnest about murdering Tony is it likely he would have gone to his rescue immediately the accident happened and risked his own life as he did? Why, he could easily have let Tony drown?"

"Yes, that's true," agreed Myra, with a despairing gesture. "I don't know what to make of it. I don't know what I should do. I feel now that Tony's life is actually in danger. Should I warn him, tell him of Don Carlos's threat?"

"No, I think not, Myra, unless he says something more which leads you to believe he meant the threat seriously," said Lady Fermanagh, after a thoughtful pause. "Oh, my dear, I do wish you had taken my warning not to play with fire, and I do hope Don Carlos was not in earnest!"

CHAPTER X

When Myra, having recovered herself, went from her state-room into the saloon a little later, it was to find that Don Carlos had, so to speak, "spiked her guns," had she intended to denounce him as being responsible for the "accident" to Tony.

The captain of the *Killarney*, it appeared, had held an inquiry as to who was responsible for having left the rail unfastened and charged two members of the crew with neglect. On learning this, Don Carlos had at once interviewed the captain and taken the blame upon himself, explaining that he remembered fingering the bolt while he was talking, and doubtless unfastened it.

He had told his fellow guests the same thing when they praised and complimented him for his gallant rescue.

"Don Carlos is a true sportsman," said one of the men of the party to Myra. "My own opinion is that he has made up the yarn about unfastening the bolt, just to prevent us making too much of a hero of him and to save any of the crew from getting into trouble. He has been in to see Tony, I hear, told him it was all his fault and asked him to accept his apologies. Of course, his idea is to try to prevent Tony from thanking him. But I guess you will thank him, Miss Rostrevor!"

"Perhaps it would please him better if I reproached him," responded Myra, whereat her companion laughed.

Don Carlos was seated opposite her at lunch, but Myra did not attempt either to thank or blame him, deciding to wait until he himself referred to the "accident," and discover, if possible, what was in his mind.

After lunch, most of the other members of the party settled down to spend the afternoon playing bridge, but Myra went on deck and ensconced herself in a comfortable chair in a sheltered spot to read and think.

She had not been there more than a few minutes when Don Carlos appeared beside her chair with a cushion in his hand. Without a word he tossed the cushion down on the boat-deck at Myra's feet, sat down on it, and rested his dark head against Myra's knees. He did it all so deliberately and with such calm assurance that Myra was somehow amused in spite of herself and laughed involuntarily.

"Evidently the poor man is so overcome by sea-sickness that he doesn't know what he is doing and needs a nurse!" she exclaimed. "Shall I call for a steward?"

She slewed her chair round as she spoke, and laughed again as Don Carlos, suddenly deprived of the support of her knees, fell backward. He did not seem in the least disconcerted, however, and merely rolled over on his side, supported his head on one hand, and gazed up at Myra quizzically.

"That was rather the equivalent of unfastening the bolt of the rail, was it not, Myra?" he drawled. "I hope you will now proceed to rescue me from the slough of despond by telling me that you love me and will marry me?"

"You said once that I would be a suitable mate for El—er—what's his name?—El Cojuelo Diablo, isn't it?—your pet brigand, I mean," retorted Myra. "Now you are presumably suggesting that I am a fit mate for a man guilty of attempted murder!"

Don Carlos smiled enigmatically.

"El Diablo Cojuelo is the correct name, Myra," he said in the same lazy, unmoved tone. "If I fail to conquer you and teach you the meaning of love, perhaps El Diablo Cojuelo will. Beloved, I should love to rest my head against your knees and feel your fingers caressing my hair."

"Don't be so utterly ridiculous!" exclaimed Myra.

"In novels, as you know," went on Don Carlos, paying no heed to her protest, "the fair heroine usually marries the gallant who rescues her, or her half-witted brother, or her aged parent, from drowning. You can give the plot a new turn by marrying me for saving your lover from drowning. Mr. Standish was good enough to say that it was 'demmed sporty of me' to rescue him and that he owes me his life. Why not suggest to him, Myra, that he can best show his gratitude by surrendering to me his greatest pride and treasure—you?"

"Your audacity is only equalled by your conceit," Myra commented. "Let me warn you——"

"Let me warn you, you siren, that I shall go to any lengths to win you," interrupted Don Carlos with sudden passion. "This morning's incident was a warning to prove to you I am in earnest. Dios! why do you torture me so? At times you make me hate you almost as much as I love you!"

He sprang to his feet, picked up the cushion on which he had been reclining and hurled it overboard, then strode away without another word, leaving Myra thrilled and more than a little scared.

"It rather looks as if I shall have to take him seriously after all!" she soliloquised. "I wonder what I should do?"

She was left wondering and sorely perplexed, for within an hour she found Don Carlos obviously carrying on a violent flirtation with another girl, and at dinner, at which Tony Standish appeared looking little the worse for his adventure, he was the life and soul of the party.

After dinner he delighted the company by singing some Spanish songs, accompanying himself on the guitar, and he was enthusiastically applauded.

"Why, old chap, you ought to be the star baritone in Grand Opera!" cried Tony. "Sing us another, please."

"Sorry, but I promised to sing to the crew in the fo'c'sle—and I always keep my promises," responded Don Carlos, and flashed a smiling glance at Myra as he went out.

He became as popular with the crew as with his fellow-guests during the days that followed, and seemed to enjoy himself hugely, a fact which somehow piqued Myra, who felt he had been, and was still, making mock of her. She was forced to the conclusion that his passionate outburst had been merely a clever piece of acting, for he made no further attempt to make love to her during the cruise, and at times seemed to shun her.

* * *

"Now that we are in Spain, dear people, you must permit me to try to repay you in some small measure for the wonderful hospitality extended to me in England," he said to Tony and his guests, when at last they disembarked at Cadiz. "You are my guests from now onward."

That evening he entertained the whole party royally at the premier hotel of the city, and next morning they found a fleet of luxurious Hispano cars waiting to convey them through some of the most picturesque parts of Spain to El Castillo de Ruiz, his ancestral home, situated in a fertile valley amid the heights of the Sierra Morena.

It was a mediaeval-looking place, part of which had been built by the Moors, and used as a fortress.

"It is still, to some extent, a fortress," Don Carlos had told his guests in advance, "for always I have to be on the alert lest that rascal El Diablo Cojuelo should raid the place again, and I employ an armed guard. Let me warn you, dear people, that if El Diablo learns I am entertaining a party of wealthy English people he may attempt another raid."

The others had laughed, assuming that he was jesting. Most of them had decided that Don Carlos had "invented" El Diablo Cojuelo and his brigand gang, with the object of adding a spice of adventure to their visit.

El Castillo de Ruiz was a place of surprises. It looked massive and strong enough to resist an artillery siege, let alone the attack of a few bandits, and its outward appearance immediately gave the impression that a guest would have to expect to endure at least some of the discomforts of the Middle Ages.

Several of the party exchanged glances of dismay as they alighted from their cars in the great cobbled courtyard or patio, to find themselves stared at by a motley crew of men, women and children, and to see pigs, dogs, asses and fowls wandering about.

"Looks as if we'll have to rough it!" whispered Tony to Myra. "I didn't expect this sort of thing—what?"

Myra made a moue, but did not answer. She was wondering if Don Carlos's invitation had been by way of an elaborate practical joke, wondering if he intended to subject her to intense discomfort under the guise of hospitality, or if he had some surprise in store.

The first surprise came when she followed Don Carlos into the great hall of the castle to find a retinue of servants in livery, headed by a gorgeously-attired major-domo carrying a silver wand of office, waiting to greet their master and his guests. The hall itself was panelled with polished Spanish mahogany, black with age, and softly illuminated by cunningly-concealed electric lights around the painted roof. There were beautiful Persian and Moorish rugs on the floor, and here and there along the walls there hung paintings by Old Masters between stands of ancient armour.

"Magnificent!" cried Myra in her impulsive way, after a gasp of amazement. "Magnificent! This is the sort of hall one can imagine Velasquez delighting to paint, the fit setting and background for a Spanish Grandee in all his glory."

"I thank you, señorita," said Don Carlos, with a low bow. "El Castillo de Ruiz is but a poor background for the most beautiful of women, but you honour it by your presence, and all it contains is yours and at your service. I give you welcome!"

He gave quick orders to the major-domo, who in turn issued orders to the small army of servants—men in livery and comely maids in neat black dresses with perky caps and wisps of aprons—to escort the guests to their various apartments.

The magnificence of the hall might have prepared Myra for something equally luxurious in other parts of the castle, yet she gasped again in astonishment when she found herself ushered into a bedroom beautifully decorated in dove grey and rose pink, a room in which everything harmonised

delightfully. The small casement window, set in a wall three or four feet thick, admitted little light, but that fault was remedied by the fact that the room, like the great hall below, was softly lighted by electricity.

"The señorita would like a bath?" inquired the trim maid in English, opening another door, to reveal a beautifully-appointed little bathroom.

"Why, this is wonderful!" exclaimed Myra, with an involuntary laugh. "I never expected such luxuries in such a grim-looking, old-world place. Tell me, are all the rooms like this?"

"This, señorita, is the most beautiful of all, but all the guests' rooms are lovely," the maid answered. "The master himself designed and planned them all. He is wonderful."

"He certainly is, and I must congratulate him," said Myra. "Is it true, by the way, that there is a daring brigand lurking about in the mountains around here?"

"You mean El Diablo Cojuelo, señorita?" the maid responded, and instinctively crossed herself. "He has not been seen for months, but his very name still terrifies. He is daring beyond belief, señorita, and no woman is safe from him. The saints forbid that El Diablo Cojuelo should come back while you are here!"

Myra had mentally discounted Don Carlos's tales about the bandit, just as she had discounted his passionate avowals of love, and she began to feel that she had been doing him an injustice—at least as far as El Diablo Cojuelo was concerned.

"Well, he promised me romance, and he certainly seems to have provided the right setting," she reflected, as she leisurely bathed and changed. "A sort of Aladdin's palace among the hills of Spain, but fitted up in a way more wonderful than any genii could have contrived. Pigs and fowls and people who look like barbarians outside; all the luxuries of civilisation inside, including an English-speaking maid. And a real live daring brigand apparently lurking about in the mountains. I feel that anything might happen at any minute. This is more like a romantic novel than real life."

Myra went down to the great hall to find the rest of the guests as enthusiastic as herself about the appointments of the castle.

"You should see my room, my dear," exclaimed Lady Fermanagh. "It is an exquisite harmony in primrose and pale green that gives one the impression of sunlight and Spring."

"Mine is decorated in Japanese style," chimed in Tony. "There are some priceless lacquers on the walls, some exquisite old Japanese prints, and some of the fittings of the dressing-table are of old jade. Actually, I believe Don Carlos must have had the place specially fitted up for me, knowing how keen I am on Japanese things."

Congratulations were showered on Don Carlos, who shrugged his shoulders and smilingly tried to make light of the whole matter.

"One must have comforts even in the wilds," he said. "I had the whole place modernised inside as far as possible, without altering its grim exterior, and it amused me to plan the furnishings and colour schemes to suit the tastes of the guests I might be likely to have the honour of entertaining."

A gong sounded, and the magnificent major-domo appeared to announce that dinner was served, and to lead the guests to the dining-table, the very sight of which evoked rapturous expressions of admiration.

The table was of highly-polished black mahogany, and instead of a fillet of lace there was a slab of pure crystal at every place set for a guest. All the appointments of the table were of crystal and silver, and in its centre there was a great crystal bowl filled with Spring flowers. The effect was strikingly artistic and wholly delightful. The overhead lights reflected the table appointments and the flowers in the surface of the table itself, much in the way that sunlight and shadow reflect the surrounding trees in a dark pool.

"Don Carlos, you are an artist!" exclaimed Myra, who loved beauty. "Your castle is full of surprises."

"And who knows, dear lady, that I may not have still more surprises in store for you," responded Don Carlos, with a cryptic smile. "Remember that I always keep my promises."

CHAPTER XI

After what they had seen, it came as no great surprise to the guests of Don Carlos to find themselves served with a dinner which would have done credit to the Ritz or the Savoy, and with rare wines of the choicest vintages.

"Would you care to dance after dinner, or merely to listen to a wireless programme?" their host inquired during the meal. "Concealed in the big antique cabinet in the hall there is a powerful wireless set with which I can pick up any European station, and possibly you noticed that the floor of the hall is really a spring dance-floor, stained to make it seem as ancient as the panelling."

"Our host is a magician!" cried Lady Fermanagh.

"You certainly seem to be something of a magician, Don Carlos, and your castle is something like Aladdin's cave," Myra remarked to her host as she was dancing with him later in the evening in the great hall.

"Myra, darling, have I found the magic to make your heart respond to the call of love?" asked Don Carlos in a low voice. "My castle lacks nothing save a mistress, and all my heart is craving for you, its ideal mate. I love you, love you, love you, mia cara, with all the strength and passion of my being. Confess that you love me, darling, and say you will be mine."

Myra found herself compelled to look into his glittering dark eyes, felt as if she were being hypnotised, and it was only by an effort of will that she broke the spell he seemed to be casting on her.

"It isn't fair to take advantage of your position as host to make love to me again," she protested, annoyed to find her heart throbbing tumultuously and her cheeks burning. "You are quite a wonderful person, but I do not intend to give you the opportunity to justify your boasts."

"Who knows but what I may make the opportunity, Myra, and take you in spite of yourself?" Don Carlos responded. "Here I am a king, and none dares dispute my authority, save El Diablo Cojuelo."

"If you persist in talking like that, I shall not feel safe in your house," said Myra. "That sounded like a veiled threat, Don Carlos, and you are not playing the game."

"There are no set rules to the game of love, dear lady, and I am playing to win," retorted Don Carlos, scarcely above a whisper. "Listen for your lover at midnight."

At heart Myra was a little scared, although her pride would not permit her to acknowledge the fact. She remembered how she had been awakened at dead of night at Auchinleven, with the impression strong upon her that someone had touched her, and had found Don Carlos's note on her pillow. She remembered his threats or promises to take her in spite of everything...

Most of the guests were tired after their long journey, and the party broke up about eleven o'clock. Myra went to her own grey and rose bedroom, declined the services of the waiting maid and carefully bolted the door after bidding the girl good-night.

"What did he mean by telling me to listen for my lover at midnight?" she wondered. "What am I scared about? He surely wouldn't be so dastardly as to force his way into my room... Oh, I wish I hadn't come!"

Myra was tired, yet she was reluctant to undress and go to bed, flung herself down in a chair by the fire, and lit a cigarette. Presently the room seemed to her oppressively hot and she rose and opened the casement. As she did so she saw lights moving about in the dark courtyard below, and again she felt unreasonably apprehensive until common sense told her the lights were probably lanterns carried by outdoor servants attending to their duties.

At last she heard a clock in one of the corridors strike twelve, and as the last stroke died away a mellow voice, which she recognised as that of Don Carlos, rang out in song in the courtyard beneath her window. He sang in Spanish, accompanying himself on a guitar, and although Myra could understand but few of the words she knew he was singing a passionate love song, serenading her, and she was conscious of a heart thrill.

She rose and moved involuntarily towards the open window, where she stood listening, the prey of mingled emotions. It did not occur to her for some minutes that her figure would be silhouetted against the light, and when the thought did flash across her mind she moved back quickly and switched off the lights, but crept back again to the casement to listen again to the thrilling song until the last notes died

away.

"Adios, mia cara!" said the voice below, and there was silence.

Strangely stirred, Myra undressed in the dark and crept into bed, but, tired though she was, it was a long time before she could compose herself to sleep.

"Am I falling in love with him?" she asked herself, and did not answer her own question.

She was inclined to laugh at herself next morning, and to chide herself for being sentimental, and the opportunity to administer another reproof speedily presented itself.

"Did you hear someone singing a serenade in the courtyard last night, Myra, after we went to bed?" one of the guests inquired in Don Carlos's hearing.

"Yes, I thought of throwing him a few coppers in the hope he would stop and let me get to sleep," drawled Myra, and had the satisfaction of seeing Don Carlos's lips tighten and his black brows draw together in a frown.

"If you are prepared to run the risk of being waylaid by El Diablo Cojuelo, I suggest that you go riding and allow me to show you the neighbourhood," Don Carlos said. "I have half a dozen good horses in my stables."

Myra, Tony, and several others who were keen on horse exercise welcomed the proposal with enthusiasm, and went to change into riding kit. Their ride was quite uneventful. They saw some fine mountain scenery, but no sign of any brigands. They did, however, meet a squad of mounted carabineros, who saluted them respectfully, and with the leader of whom Don Carlos paused to chat.

"You will be relieved to learn that the officer reports that everything seems quiet, and he has no news of El Diablo Cojuelo having been seen in the neighbourhood for many weeks," he reported when he rejoined his guests. "But I doubt if he has taken fright, as the Captain suggests. He isn't easily scared."

He made no attempt to make love to Myra that day, but often she caught him looking at her with an expression that baffled her and made her feel vaguely uneasy. He looked, somehow, like a schoolboy with a sphinx-like expression, planning mischief and inwardly enjoying some private joke.

"He is quite the most exasperating man I have ever met—and the most interesting," Myra reflected, as she dressed for dinner that evening. "I wonder if he really has a heart, or if he is acting all the time?"

Dinner was served in the great hall that night, and once again it was a triumph for the chef and the host. During the meal an orchestra, composed of some of the servants on the estate, clad in picturesque national costumes, discoursed sweet, haunting, heart-stirring music.

Outside, the courtyard was festooned with coloured lights and around lighted braziers groups of men, women and children, in multi-coloured garments, were gathered, feasting, singing, playing and dancing.

"To-night, if it pleases you, we will mingle with my people, who are holding festival in your honour," said Don Carlos when dinner was over. "I would advise you all to put on your warmest wraps, for the night winds here in the Sierra Morena are treacherous."

The night seemed quite mild, but Myra took her host's advice and put on her fur coat before going out into the courtyard to watch the performance. Don Carlos and his English guests were greeted with cheers when they appeared in the patio. A bearded patriarch, who looked as if he had stepped out of a picture by Velasquez, stepped forward and delivered a flowery speech of welcome, then comely maidens and dark-visaged youths performed a picturesque dance to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.

The set dance over, groups of men sang old Spanish and Basque folk songs, after which Don Carlos's own orchestra, which had played in the great hall during dinner, took up a position in the centre of the patio and dancing became general.

"Come, let's mingle with the throng and take part in the fun," cried Don Carlos gaily. "Come, Myra, let me teach you the Spanish dance the boys and girls are dancing so merrily."

He did not wait for an answer, and before Myra quite realised what was happening she found herself being whirled round in his arms in the midst of the motley crowd.

"Don't hold me so tightly, Don Carlos, and don't dance so fast," she protested breathlessly, after a few minutes. "I am nearly suffocated in this fur coat, and the cobbles are hurting my feet. One can't dance

on cobble-stones in satin shoes."

"Myra, darling, the delight of holding you in my arms made me forget all else," Don Carlos responded, slackening his pace. "I'll guide you out of the crowd, and make love to you instead of dancing."

"I don't want you to make love to me," said Myra, "but I shall be glad to get out of this crush, for I hate being elbowed about."

"Make way, good people, make way for the señorita who will soon be your mistress!" cried Don Carlos in Spanish, and those around stopped dancing to cheer.

Just as the couple were free of the crowd, all the electric lights, both in the castle and the courtyard, were suddenly extinguished, and at the same moment uproar broke out at the courtyard gates and shots were fired.

"The bandits! El Diablo Cojuelo and his men!" a voice screamed.

Instantly all was confusion. Women shrieked and ran in all directions in the darkness.

"I am here! Rally to your master, Don Carlos!" shouted Don Carlos.
"Rally to Don Carlos!"

Almost immediately he was surrounded, not by his own servants, but by a body of masked and armed men. Myra clung to his arm, but was snatched away from him, someone enveloped her head in a cloak, she was picked up in strong arms as if she were a baby and carried quickly for some distance. She struggled fiercely, but the cloak that enveloped her, to say nothing of her own fur coat, hampered her movements, and she was almost as helpless as an infant in the arms of its nurse.

Her captor halted for a moment, growled out some orders breathlessly in Spanish, and Myra found herself dumped down on the seat of a motor car, which immediately started off at a rapid rate. Half stifled, she tore the cloak from her face, and as she did so an arm encircled her.

"El Diablo Cojuelo has captured the prize of his lifetime!" said a deep voice triumphantly.

Myra's heart seemed to miss a beat as she felt the outlaw's arm tighten around her, panic seized her, and she had to fight the inclination to scream, and scream and scream.

"You are trembling, little lady," said the muffled voice of her captor.
"Do not be so sore afraid. I am not the fiend people make El Diablo Cojuelo out to be, and will take care of so precious a treasure. Don Carlos will ransom you, but perhaps when you have seen me and my mountain nest you will not want to be ransomed."

Myra's natural courage began to reassert itself, and she was ashamed of having displayed any signs of fear. "Displayed" is hardly the word, for the inside of the car, which was hurtling along at great speed, was so dark that she could not even see the shape of the man whose arm encircled her, and she knew he could not see her.

Somehow, the brigand's voice, muffled though it was—as if he were speaking with something over his face—struck her as vaguely familiar, and as Myra collected her scattered wits it occurred to her that El Diablo Cojuelo had spoken in English.

"A Spanish brigand who speaks English!" she exclaimed aloud, and Cojuelo laughed.

"Si, señorita!" he answered. "So we shall be able to understand each other. Don Carlos de Ruiz taught me English, and I imitate his voice and accent when I am speaking your language. We are really very good friends, Don Carlos and I, and he bears me no ill-will. I provide him with amusement, and he would be sorry to see me captured."

"He will certainly bear you ill-will for having kidnapped me, and make every effort to kill you," retorted Myra, recognising that Cojuelo's muffled voice did resemble that of Don Carlos.

"Because he loves you?" queried Cojuelo, with a chuckle. "You think he will be mad because I have robbed him of his heart's desire?"

"How do you know that he loves me?" asked Myra in amazement.

She was no longer terrified, and had recovered her nerve, but she still found it difficult to believe she

was not dreaming. It seemed more like a nightmare than actuality that she should be sitting in a pitch-dark car, talking of love and Don Carlos to a Spanish outlaw who had captured her, and whose arm encircled her waist. She was not conscious of fear now, but Cojuelo's reply to her question scared her more than a little.

"Sweet señorita, what man with a heart and eyesight could resist falling in love with so beautiful a woman?" he responded. "Perhaps I shall fall in love with you myself and refuse to surrender you, no matter how great a ransom is offered. For years I have been seeking my ideal, but not one of the many women I have captured in my time pleased me enough to make me wish to keep her. You may be different."

Before Myra could find words to reply, the car came to a sudden stop, the door was flung open and a gruff voice growled out a question in Spanish which Cojuelo answered in the same language.

"We will alight now, señorita, and take a little riding exercise," he said to Myra. "I know you are an expert horsewoman, for I was near you this morning when you were riding with Don Carlos, and I know you will have no difficulty in sitting a mule although you are not in riding dress. Only mules can negotiate the paths that lead to my mountain nest. Come!"

CHAPTER XII

Without a word, Myra stepped out, to see by the headlights of the car that she was apparently in a mountain gorge, and to see a group of masked and armed men standing beside some mules. She turned to look at her captor as she reached the front of the car, and found that Cojuelo was wearing what looked like a monk's cowl which completely covered his face, and which accounted for his muffled voice. She saw that he was tall, but that was all.

Cojuelo snapped out some orders, and a soberly-dressed, elderly man, wearing no mask and carrying in his arms a number of parcels, appeared out of the darkness and got into the car, which turned and sped away.

"Bien!" exclaimed Cojuelo, as the motor disappeared. "Everything is working according to plan. In the unlikely event of the car being stopped, it is found to contain Garcilaso, Don Carlos's steward, returning from doing some marketing in the city. And who would guess that the fair señorita had been spirited away in one of Don Carlos's own cars?"

"So some of Don Carlos's servants are in your pay?" exclaimed Myra.

"They are all in my pay, sweet lady, and every man knows it is as much as his life is worth to betray me," Cojuelo answered, with a triumphant laugh. "But we waste time, and must not take the risk, remote as it is, of being seen. Let me assist you to mount."

He picked Myra up in his arms and swung her up without any apparent effort on to the saddle of a mule which one of the men had led forward, mounted another mule himself, and gave some rapid orders.

"Follow me and ride carefully, señorita, for there are some steep and dangerous paths to negotiate," he called to Myra. "Mendoza will lead your mule at the most perilous places. *Avanzar!*"

To anyone less accustomed to riding and to taking risks than Myra, that night ride through the mountains of the Sierra Morena would have been a blood-curdling and nerve-shattering experience. Often she had to guide her mule along a rough path barely a couple of yards wide, with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet on one side, a path where a stumble or a false step on the part of the animal would have meant certain death.

Yet Myra was conscious of no sense of fear now, and the dangers only made her pulse beat faster and stirred her blood. But it was no easy task riding a mule along precipitous paths and keeping her seat while slithering down slopes, clad as she was in only a filmy evening frock and a fur coat, and she cried out in protest at last:

"How much further, Señor Cojuelo? I cannot sit this ungainly brute much longer in these clothes."

"Courage, sweet lady, we have but a little further to go," Cojuelo called back to her over his shoulder.

He spoke truly. A few minutes later the party halted in a narrow, pitch-dark ravine, and Myra was lifted from her mule.

"Take my arm, señorita, lest you stumble in the darkness on the rough ground," said the muffled voice of El Diablo Cojuelo. "The entrance to my mountain eyrie is narrow and unprepossessing, but I promise you that you shall find comfort within."

He pressed the switch of an electric torch as he spoke, and guided Myra over rocky ground to what seemed a mere cleft in a wall of rock.

"You will notice that this entrance to my lair is only wide enough to allow of the passage of one person at a time," he resumed. "Here a handful of men could defy an Army Corps, and there are other means of entry—and other ways of escape. I give you welcome, sweet lady, to the fortress of El Diablo Cojuelo."

Myra, again with the sensation that the whole affair was a sort of fantastic dream, squeezed through the cleft revealed by the light of the electric torch, advanced two or three yards, passed through another cleft at right-angles to the first, and stopped at Cojuelo's bidding.

"You perceive, señorita, that we seem to have come to a dead end," said the bandit, flashing the light about. "What appears to be a solid wall of rock confronts us. It is actually a cunningly-contrived door giving entrance to a series of caves which Nature must surely have constructed for my use. And El Diablo Cojuelo has improved on nature. *He aquí!*"

With his foot he pressed some hidden spring or lever on the ground, and a massive door swung open, revealing to the astonished eyes of Myra a big, irregularly-shaped room that looked as if it had been hewn out of the solid rock, a room furnished with roughly-constructed chairs and a settee on which there were many cushions, and with many rugs on the rocky floor. Most amazing feature of all, the place was lighted with electricity and warmed by an electric radiator.

"I suppose I am awake and not dreaming!" exclaimed Myra, moving forward and gazing round with wondering eyes. "This is more amazing than the castle of Don Carlos. Are you a magician as well as a brigand?"

"Both, señorita," Cojuelo answered, as he closed the secret door, "but there is nothing magical about it, after all. It was a simple matter to have an electric light plant smuggled up here in sections. It was an equally simple matter to obtain rugs and cushions from the Castillo de Ruiz, since all the servants of Don Carlos, as I have told you, are in my pay."

He strode forward to the table and touched a bell, and almost immediately an ancient woman with a wrinkled monkey-like, nut-brown face, tanned by wind and weather, appeared through an opening concealed by a curtain in the further wall. She was obviously of great age, but her eyes were bright and sparkling with intelligence, and she was active in her movements.

"This is Mother Dolores, who will attend you," Cojuelo explained, after giving the woman some instructions in her native tongue. "She has a change of clothing and refreshments in readiness for you. I will leave you in her charge while I attend to the disposal of my other captives."

He disappeared through the aperture in the wall, and Mother Dolores, after inspecting Myra appraisingly and admiringly, gabbling away in Spanish idioma meanwhile, indicated to the fair prisoner that she wished her to accompany her.

She led the way through a regular maze of crooked passages, and Myra saw that Cojuelo's mountain lair was a strange freak of nature, probably the result of a volcanic upheaval or an earthquake in some prehistoric age. It was a series of caves connected with fissures, a sort of irregular honeycomb of rock.

"Apartamento—dormitorio," were the only words Myra understood of the flood Dolores let loose as she ushered her into one of the cave-rooms, and by pantomime indicated that she wished Myra to undress.

The rocky walls of the cave-bedroom were hidden beneath hangings of moire silk, the floor was thickly carpeted, and the place was equipped with an oak bedstead and some small pieces of roughly-constructed furniture. But what made Myra gasp in amazement was to see her own silk dressing-gown and the nightie she had worn the night before lying on the eiderdown bedspread, together with other garments, while on the primitive dressing-table stood her dressing-case.

"Incredible!" she exclaimed. "These things were in my bed-room at the Castillo de Ruiz only an hour or two ago!"

"Si, si, señorita, El Castillo de Ruiz," said Dolores, nodding her head and showing her toothless gums in a grin. "Maravilloso! Etra vez el bueno maestro Cojuelo."

"Cojuelo boasted that all the servants of Don Carlos are in his pay, and it must be true," thought Myra. "These things must have been taken from my room before the raid, and the servants probably knew El Diablo Cojuelo was going to kidnap me.... Surely I have nothing to fear from a man who takes such trouble to ensure that I shall be comfortable? And yet..."

Dolores scuffled out, still gabbling unintelligibly in Spanish, but reappeared almost at once with a jug of hot water. She stood watching Myra with mingled curiosity and admiration as her fair charge washed after leisurely undressing, then put on her chic night-dress and dressing-gown, and a filmy, attractive boudoir cap.

"Señor Cojuelo said something about refreshments," said Myra, hoping she would make Mother Dolores understand, and trying to remember some of the Spanish words she had learned. "I should like a cup of coffee—café—or a glass of vino, and a cigarette—cigarillo. Entender?"

"Si, si, señorita," answered Dolores. "Café, vino, aguardiene, cigarillo, Todo pronto."

She opened the door and made signals to Myra that she wished her to return with her to the outer apartment, at the same time letting loose another torrent of words.

"Perhaps meals in bed-rooms are charged extra!" Myra remarked, and laughed at the idea.

She was conscious of no sensation of actual fear, but she was curious and apprehensive as to how El Diablo Cojuelo would behave, remembering his reputation and his hint that he might fall in love with her and refuse to surrender her no matter how great the ransom offered.

Still smiling, Myra slid her bare feet into her bedroom slippers and accompanied Mother Dolores back through the maze of crooked, rocky passages to the outer apartment.

"Comer e heber e fumar, señorita," said Dolores, indicating a tray set on a stool close by the electric heater. On the tray stood a steaming jug of coffee, a flagon of cognac, a plate of biscuits, a cup and saucer, and a silver cigarette-box.

"More magic!" commented Myra, as Dolores set a chair for her and poured out a glass of cognac which she insisted upon Myra drinking at once. Then she poured out coffee, gabbled something about the "bueno maestro," and withdrew.

Left alone, Myra sipped the fragrant coffee and looked about her with interest.

"This is certainly brigandage up to date!" she reflected. "I wonder what manner of man El Diablo Cojuelo is?"

A minute or two later she heard a movement behind her and glanced over her shoulder expecting to see Mother Dolores, but saw instead the hooded figure of El Diablo Cojuelo. Instinctively, she drew her silken dressing-gown closer around her and started to her feet.

"I am sorry if I startled you, señorita," said Cojuelo. "It is a delightful surprise to find you like this."

"Dolores seemed to be insisting that I must come here for my coffee," explained Myra, recovering her composure.

"I instructed Madre Dolores to ask you to do me the honour of returning here to have a talk with me before you retired, señorita, forgetting that you do not understand much Spanish," responded Cojuelo. "I hardly hoped to find you in négligé. You are a vision of beauty to ravish the heart of any man, sweet lady."

"Thanks for the compliment, señor," said Myra coldly. "If I had understood you wished to talk to me, I should not have prepared to retire. Surely anything you have to say will keep until to-morrow. Meanwhile, I shall be thankful for a cigarette."

"Pardon!" exclaimed Cojuelo, turning quickly to pick up the silver cigarette-box from the table, and proffering it. "Your favourite brand, you perceive. You will give El Diablo Cojuelo credit, I hope, for making provision for your comfort."

"You certainly seem to be something of a magician," commented Myra, as she helped herself to a cigarette and accepted a light. "Perhaps you are in league with the Devil, and that is why you are known as El Diablo Cojuelo! I should be interested to know how you managed to get some of my clothes here, together with my toilet requisites."

"That was not the work of the devil, señorita," the hooded figure answered, with a muffled laugh, "El Diablo Cojuelo thinks of everything, and had made his preparations in advance. Did I not tell you all the servants of El Castillo de Ruiz were in my pay? It was a simple matter, therefore, to have some of your things smuggled out of the castle before the raid. Pray be seated, señorita."

He waved his hand invitingly towards the couch which was drawn up close to the electric heater, and Myra, reflecting that it was in keeping with the rest of the fantastic, dream-like adventure that she, clad only in a nightdress and dressing-gown, should be talking to a hooded bandit in an electrically-lighted room in the heart of a mountain, seated herself.

"I suppose I should thank you for being so thoughtful," she remarked, with a tinge of irony in her sweet voice. "Am I to understand that even the English-speaking maid at the Castillo de Ruiz is in your pay?"

"Even she, señorita, and I reproach myself—I who have boasted that I think of everything—for not having kidnapped her at the same time as you, so that we should have had no language difficulty such as has occurred with Madre Dolores. If you wish it, I will kidnap her to-morrow."

"Please don't trouble, señor. I can't believe she is in your pay. She seemed afraid and crossed herself when she mentioned your name. You might frighten her to death. Incidentally, do you wear your disguise all the time, even when you are safe here in your mountain lair? Do you look so much like a devil that you are afraid to show your face?"

She looked challengingly at the hooded figure of her captor as she asked the questions. His cowl had two holes cut for the eyes and a slit at the mouth, and she was wondering what manner of face it concealed.

"The señorita pays me the compliment of wishing to see me without disguise!" exclaimed Cojuelo. "Sweet lady, are you not afraid you may fall in love with your captor?"

"I think I can take the risk," retorted Myra drily.

"It is more than a risk," rejoined Cojuelo, "but I will discard my disguise with pleasure. Behold El Diablo Cojuelo!"

He flung off his cowl and robe, and Myra sprang to her feet with a cry of amazement and her hands went convulsively to her breast. For she found herself looking into the smiling and triumphant eyes of Don Carlos de Ruiz.

CHAPTER XIII

"Don Carlos!" she gasped. "You! But I don't understand."

"I am El Diablo Cojuelo, dear Myra," explained Don Carlos, obviously enjoying the sensation he had created. "I feared you had guessed my secret."

"So the whole affair, I take it, is an elaborate practical joke?" Myra queried after a pause, dropping back into her seat and forcing a laugh. "El Diablo Cojuelo, the outlaw, is merely a creature of your own imagination?"

"I am El Diablo Cojuelo," repeated Don Carlos. "I am a dual personality. At my castle and at Court I am Don Carlos de Ruiz, Governor of a Province and an administrator of the laws. Here in my mountain eyrie I am Cojuelo, the outlaw, acknowledging no laws save those I make myself."

"I still do not understand," remarked Myra, with perplexity in her blue eyes. "Do you mean to say you lead a double life and occasionally masquerade as a brigand, without anyone knowing that Don Carlos and Cojuelo are one and the same? Is there no one aware of your identity?"

"Many of my people are aware of my identity, but none would betray me, even if put to the torture," replied Don Carlos. "Those who are in the secret vastly enjoy the way in which I hoodwink the authorities. They enjoy the joke of my offer of a reward for the capture of El Diablo Cojuelo, dead or alive, and my periodical 'searches' for the outlaw."

"But what is the idea of it all?" inquired Myra. "It seems foolishness to me, but perhaps it flatters your vanity to be able to go about scaring women and kidnapping girls."

There was scorn instead of bewilderment in her voice and eyes now, and Don Carlos's pale face flushed slightly.

"Before the coming of El Diablo Cojuelo there were men in this province who had enriched themselves at the cost of the peasants, cheated farmers out of their land, and made them little better than serfs," he explained quietly and deliberately. "The law could not touch these vampires, parasites, money-lenders and profiteers. Cojuelo came upon the scene, bled these rogues as they had bled the peasants, plundered their houses, spirited them away, and held them to ransom."

"Really! Quite a profitable hobby, I suppose!" Myra remarked.

"Quite—and useful, to boot," responded Don Carlos, his face now expressionless. "With the money which I have wrung from the spoilers I have been able to restore their lands to many of the people without much cost to myself, to pay their debts and aid them to escape from the thralldom of blood-sucking money-lenders and tyrannical masters. I have also made it possible for men to marry the girls of their choice, in cases where the parents objected. A threat from El Diablo Cojuelo to carry off a girl if she is not allowed to marry the man she loves, is usually enough to bring her parents to their senses."

"So, if I understand you aright, you are a sort of benevolent brigand, doing good without much risk or expense to yourself?" remarked Myra. "A sort of modern Claude Duval—although he was a highwayman and not a kidnapper."

"It pleases you to be ironic, Myra," responded Don Carlos. "Expense does not concern me, for I am very wealthy, but it pleases me to deprive the blood-suckers of their ill-gotten gains. As for the risk, I suggest you underestimate it. There is a price on the head of El Diablo Cojuelo, as I have mentioned, and the military have orders to shoot at sight. Apart from that, however, if my identity were betrayed, my wealth and position would not save me from being cast into prison. I might even be condemned to death."

"How amusing!" commented Myra, still inclined to be scornful. "What you say may be true, but it does not explain or excuse your conduct in bringing me here as your captive. I was your guest, and therefore you were responsible for my safety."

"I warned you that El Diablo Cojuelo might carry you off and teach you how to love," answered Don Carlos, his grave face illuminated by a boyish, impish smile.

"Oh, don't talk nonsense!" exclaimed Myra impatiently. "You cannot excuse your conduct. I haven't been robbing the poor or anything of the sort, and if you attempt to keep me here there will be trouble. Tony will move heaven and earth to find me."

"I could excuse myself, if excuses were necessary, by explaining that I have captured girls before to save them from marrying men they did not love," said Don Carlos. "El Diablo Cojuelo fell in love with you at first sight, and will prevent you from marrying the man to whom you are betrothed but do not love."

"Don Carlos, please be sensible," pleaded Myra, at heart a little fearful now. "Don't you realise that this escapade may have serious consequences for you? Tony is sure to communicate with the British Ambassador, and the affair may become one of international importance. The best thing you can do is to take me back to-morrow morning, and explain that the whole affair was an elaborately-planned practical joke."

"I am quite agreeable to do that, Myra, provided you promise to marry me and confess that you love me," said Don Carlos. "We can explain that we succeeded in escaping from the clutches of El Diablo Cojuelo, or, if you prefer it, you can tell Mr. Antony Standish that I rescued you, and you have fallen in love with your rescuer."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," exclaimed Myra with spirit.

"In that case, Myra, you will remain here as the captive of El Diablo Cojuelo, and the outlaw will try to teach you the meaning of love and passion, teach you to respond to the call of your heart—if you have a heart. You shall have your first lesson now, my sweet captive."

He sat down beside Myra on the couch as he spoke, flung his arms around her and drew her into a close embrace in spite of her frantic struggles, crushing her close to his breast and kissing her lips, her cheeks, and her breast. Myra screamed breathlessly, but he only laughed at her.

"Why waste your breath, sweet lady?" he laughed. "No one can hear your cries, except, perhaps, Mother Dolores; but if all my band were within hearing not one man would even think of daring to attempt to intervene, no, not even if you were his own daughter. You are completely at my mercy."

"Let me go. Oh, please, please, let me go!" gasped Myra, still vainly striving to break from his embrace. "Surely you won't be coward enough to take advantage of my helplessness!"

"Only confess that you love me, Myra darling, and I will do anything you ask," Don Carlos replied, his deep voice vibrant with passion, his dark eyes aglow with ardour. "Only confess yourself conquered."

"I won't! I won't! I'd rather die! I hate you, hate you!" stormed Myra gaspingly, still struggling. "Let me go, you brute. You are hurting me."

Don Carlos relaxed his hold, but restrained Myra when she would have risen from the couch.

"Myra, darling, why do you persist in resisting me and refusing to listen to the call of love?" he asked gently. "Do you realise that your resistance is but adding fuel to the fires of my passion? You drove me almost mad when you coquetted with me aboard the yacht, made me crazy with desire, then laughed at me. I am but human, and my longing for you is not to be denied. I vowed I would make you mine if I had to break every law of God and man. You are mine now, my lovely, adorable Myra, my heart's delight, mine to do with as I will, to take or break."

The quietly spoken words struck dread into Myra's heart. It seemed to her that a remorseless gleam had crept into the bright eyes of Don Carlos. Intuitively she knew that he was determined to impose his will upon her, and mingled with her dread there was resentment.

"Is it useless to appeal to your better nature, to your chivalry?" she asked quickly, her voice tremulous.

"Is it useless to appeal to you again to surrender to the call of love?" countered Don Carlos. "Myra, mia cara, every fibre of my being is pulsing with love for you, and my heart is craving for the joy and rapture that you alone can give. Look into my eyes, mia cara, and whisper that you love me."

He laid his hands on Myra's shoulders as he spoke, compelling her to meet his burning glance, and Myra felt as if she were being hypnotised.

"You love me, Myra darling, and it is only pride that prevents you from confessing yourself conquered," went on the caressing voice. "When you are mine, you will whisper you are glad that I conquered you. You are lovely, my dear, seductive, adorable prisoner, and the beauty of you sets me aching with longing."

His hands slid caressingly from Myra's shoulders down her arms to her hands, which he raised to his lips and then drew round his neck. Myra was trembling, and her breath was coming and going unsteadily, and she felt as if she had lost all powers of resistance, felt as if she had been drugged. She closed her eyes, and a gasping sigh broke from her lips as Don Carlos strained her close to his breast again, murmuring endearments.

"Let me set your heart afire with burning kisses," he murmured. "I will kiss the heart out of you, sweet one, and kiss it back again white hot with my own love and ardour. Give me back kiss for kiss, beloved."

Again he was kissing her, hungrily, passionately, yet tenderly withal. Myra's senses were reeling. He did seem to be drawing the very heart out of her with his lips, and drugging her senses. She felt as if she were suffocating, and again she began to struggle involuntarily after a few minutes as he drew her down with him on to the couch.

"You are stifling me," she panted. "Let me go."

Don Carlos released her at once, and she rose to her feet, pressing her hands instinctively to her heaving bosom, as if to try to still the wild throbbing of her heart. Her lovely face was flushed, her breath was coming and going in sobbing gasps, her eyes, dark with emotion, were feverishly bright, and her whole body seemed afire.

"Let me go now, please," she added gaspingly. "I can bear no more. I—I think I am going to faint."

She swayed as she spoke, and Don Carlos was on his feet in an instant, and had thrown his arm around her lest she should collapse.

"Lie down again for a few minutes, beloved, until you recover," he said quickly.

He settled Myra back again among the cushions on the couch, and insisted upon her drinking a glass of aguardiente, which made her feel more feverish than ever but revived her and dispelled the faintness.

"Did I kiss you too hungrily, darling, and feast myself too long on your sweet lips without pausing for breath?" asked Don Carlos, after a pause, when he saw that Myra was recovering. He, too, was flushed and rather breathless, and his long, sinewy hands were trembling slightly. "Myra, beloved, have my kisses fired your heart?"

"You have hurt me," equivocated Myra, avoiding his glowing eyes. "I feel faint and exhausted. Oh, surely I have suffered enough to-night! My strength is spent. Oh, surely you won't be so cruel as to take further advantage of my helplessness?"

Don Carlos sighed heavily, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I did not mean to hurt you, and had forgotten that you must be weary," he said, after a moment of hesitation. "I will put you to bed, beloved, and to-morrow you will tell me that you love me."

He bent down and picked Myra up as if she were a baby, cradling her in his arms and smiling down into her startled blue eyes.

"Always, since our first meeting, I have longed to hold you in my arms like this and to feel that you were wholly and completely mine," he murmured, as he caressed Myra's cheek with his lips. "You are very beautiful, my sweet love. The sweetness and loveliness of you entrances and enraptures my heart. I shall spend my life admiring and adoring and worshipping, exploring and delighting in the loveliness of you, my heart's delight. Do you not feel, Myra mia, that here in your lover's arms and on my breast you have found the home of your heart?"

Yet again Myra felt he was sapping her powers of resistance, casting a spell over her, and she lay passive in his strong arms, breathing gaspingly.

"Let me go," she pleaded brokenly. "Please let me go!"

"As you wish," said Don Carlos. "I shall put my sweet baby to bed."

He carried Myra through the winding, rocky passages to her room, at the door of which Madre Dolores was waiting. The old woman cackled with laughter at sight of them, and rubbed her skinny hands together delightedly.

"Io! I see I shall not be wanted, master!" she chuckled, and scuffled away, her skinny shoulders shaking a half-suppressed merriment which betrayed her thoughts more than words could have done.

Dread gripped Myra's heart as Don Carlos carried her into the bedroom and set her down gently on the side of the bed. Every vestige of colour had drained out of her lovely face and she was trembling violently.

"Do not be afraid, Myra darling," Don Carlos murmured caressingly. "I can be gentle as any woman, and would not harm my precious treasure. Are you afraid that the sight of you will be so enticing to your lover when he takes off your dressing-gown that he will not be able to tear himself away from you?"

"Don Carlos, it isn't fair!" burst out Myra tremulously. "Please go!"

"Not until I have put my sweet baby to bed, tucked her in, and kissed her good-night," said Don Carlos, and Myra knew that further protest would be useless.

So she had, perforce, to submit to his taking off her dressing-gown, and the glowing ardour and admiration in his dark eyes when she stood before him clad only in her filmy, sleeveless "nightie" brought the hot colour flooding back to her fair face again.

"Once before, Myra mia, I have seen you like this—on that night in Scotland when I put my letter on your pillow," breathed Don Carlos. "Surely you are the loveliest and most seductive woman in the world!"

He swept Myra into his arms again and kissed her repeatedly before at last laying her down on the bed. In a sort of panic Myra slid herself under the bedclothes and begged him breathlessly to leave her, but he paid no heed. He bent over her, his dark eyes glowing like twin flames, and laid his cheek against her own.

"Bid me stay, beloved," he whispered. "Give me the love for which my whole being is craving. Bid me stay."

CHAPTER XIV

Drowsily, Myra opened her eyes, awakened by the clatter made by Madre Dolores as she set down a tray on which was a breakfast of coffee and rolls by her bedside.

"Buenos dias, señorita," said Dolores, as Myra, unable to realise for a few moments where she was, blinked at her sleepily and dazedly.

"Buenos dias," repeated Myra mechanically. "Let me see, that is Spanish for 'good morning,'" she added to herself, stretching luxuriously and yawning. "I wonder where the maid is who speaks English?"

And then the mists of sleep lifted suddenly as she sat up in bed and she remembered everything vividly. Dolores, eyeing her curiously, wondered why the English señorita blushed furiously, wondered what she could have said to cause the fair señorita such obvious embarrassment.

"Possibly it is not anything I have said which caused her to blush," reflected the old woman. "Maybe she is thinking of last night, remembering that I saw the master carrying her to bed, or perhaps she is thinking of something that happened afterwards."

Dolores was not so wide of the mark. It was recollection of the events of the preceding night that had brought the burning blush to Myra's cheeks, and the thought of the interpretation the old woman might have put on what she had seen and heard.

"Just as well, perhaps, that she does not understand English, as she was probably eavesdropping all the time," thought Myra.

She was amazed that she should have been able to sleep soundly after her emotional ordeal, until she remembered that when at last Don Carlos had desisted in his attempt to make her surrender herself voluntarily and had left her, Madre Dolores had reappeared and insisted upon her drinking something out of a glass. The "something" was a sweet and pungent cordial, which probably contained some soporific drug.

When the mists of sleep cleared away completely from her mind, Myra found it difficult to analyse her feelings, but her predominant emotion was resentment against the man who had made love to her so lawlessly and had almost imposed his will on her.

Mingled with her resentment was something akin to fear, the haunting dread that her ordeal of the previous night might be a prelude to something worse. The hot flush of shame stained her fair face again as she realised she had been on the very verge of surrendering herself.

"I hate him! I hate him!" Myra told herself as she dressed. "I'll kill myself rather than confess I love him, and let him gloat over his conquest.... What should I do? Should I promise to marry him on condition that he takes me back to-day, and then denounce him to the authorities when we reach the Castle? That would be something like treachery, but it was treachery on his part to kidnap me while I was his guest.... I shall wait and see how he behaves before deciding."

She had to wait longer than she anticipated, for she found that "El Diablo Cojuelo" had left his stronghold. Failing to make herself understood, Dolores fetched an old man who looked like a comic opera pirate and who could speak a little English.

"El bueno maestro—the boss—he go away sun-up but will come back pretty-dam-quick, yes, I think," the man explained, with many bows and smiles. Actually it was not English he spoke but a queer mixture of Spanish and American. "The boss Cojuelo, he makka the business with the Ingles at El Castillo de Ruiz. You no need to have the fear, señorita. You alla right, yes, sure aqui. I spik the Ingles all right—yes? Vos comprender? Bein! The boss, the maestro, he come back all right, señorita. Yes, allaright, tank you ver' much, please!"

Left alone in the outer room, Myra walked up and down restlessly, wondering why he had gone back to the Castillo de Ruiz. The idea of attempting to escape occurred to her, and, after satisfying herself she was not being watched, she went to the cunningly-contrived door which seemed to be part of the wall of rock.

It was difficult enough to determine which part of the wall was the door, and when she did discover the seam that indicated it, Myra could find no lock, lever or spring to open the portal.

Baffled, she wandered through the maze of rocky passages, and encountered Madre Dolores, who, realising that she was on a sort of tour of exploration, showed her various cell-like apartments, gabbling away volubly but unintelligibly all the while, before conducting her to a great cave at the end of the labyrinth, a cave in which there were mules and asses tethered to rings fixed into the walls, and men of all ages and in all sorts of garb were taking their ease, smoking, drinking and playing cards or throwing dice.

At sight of Myra all the men who were awake rose and bowed respectfully, and the old brigand who could speak some English-American lingo stepped forward.

"Salve, señorita!" he exclaimed. "We give the welcomes and salutations to our reina, the consort of our boss El Diablo Cojuelo."

Myra turned and fled in confusion, blushing hotly, and found her way back to the other big apartment. She had no watch and no means of judging the passage of time, since no daylight could be seen, but she guessed it must be evening when Madre Dolores served a third meal.

She was toying with the food that had been set before her when she heard a sharp click, the secret door swung open, and a hooded figure stepped into the room.

"I have brought you your betrothed, Myra," said Don Carlos, after quickly closing the door behind him and throwing off his disguise. "I have brought Mr. Antony Standish here, and I propose to test the strength of his love for you and your love for him."

"How interesting!" drawled Myra, with forced calmness. "Where is Tony, and how did you manage to capture him? I should have thought the whole district by now would be full of police and soldiers hunting for El Diablo Cojuelo."

"Mr. Standish has been conveyed to a cell through the entrance used by my men," answered Don Carlos. "Unfortunately the messages summoning the police and the military, and reporting that the beautiful Señorita Rostrevor and Don Carlos de Ruiz have been kidnapped, do not appear to have been delivered. Possibly the servants of Don Carlos, sent to summon aid, were intercepted by the followers of El Diablo Cojuelo."

"Quite possibly!" agreed Myra, satirically, meeting the challenging glance of his twinkling eyes unflinchingly. "But how did you manage to capture Tony? Didn't he make a fight of it?"

"A masked and armed emissary of El Diablo Cojuelo by some mysterious means found his way into El Castillo de Ruiz, surprised Mr. Standish in his own room and demanded that he should accompany him to arrange terms for your ransom. Needless to say, I was the masked emissary. Mr. Standish demanded that his own safety be guaranteed, and it was not until I sardonically suggested he was more concerned about himself than about his fiancée, and was probably content to leave the beautiful Señorita Rostrevor to the tender mercies of El Diablo Cojuelo rather than endure any personal hardship, that I persuaded him to accompany me."

"Well, the fact that he accompanied you, without any guarantee of his personal safety, shows how much he loves me," commented Myra.

"H'm! That remains to be proved, but I promise you he shall be put to the test," retorted Don Carlos. "You, of course, can simplify the situation by telling him you have fallen in love with your captor and do not wish to be ransomed."

"I can further simplify the situation by telling Tony that El Diablo Cojuelo is Don Carlos de Ruiz," said Myra.

"No, Myra, that would complicate matters, since it might necessitate my keeping Standish a prisoner here indefinitely in order to prevent him from denouncing me to the authorities. Give me your word of honour not to reveal my identity to Standish, and I will have him brought in here to strike a bargain for you in your presence. You should be interested to know what value your English lover places on you."

"I don't think you are playing fair," said Myra, after much hesitation. "However, I promise, if you

wish, not to reveal your identity to Tony to-night, but I shall not promise not to denounce you as soon as I regain my freedom."

"Thank you, Myra mia, that is sufficient promise," said Don Carlos, and laughed as he resumed his disguise. "I think I can promise you some amusement and enlightenment."

He looked again a mysterious and forbidding figure as he took a seat at the table and rang a bell and gave orders, after laying an automatic pistol in front of him. Seated on the couch some distance away, Myra had the sensation of watching and taking part in a play or a game of make-believe when, after a few minutes, Tony Standish, guarded by two villainous-looking but picturesquely-attired brigands, was marched into the apartment.

Tony's face was pale and he looked ruffled. At sight of Myra he gave a gasp of relief.

"Thank heaven you are safe, darling!" he exclaimed. "I have been crazy with anxiety about you. How have these bally ruffians been treating you?"

"I have had a ghastly time, Tony," answered Myra. "I haven't actually been ill-treated, but this man"—she nodded towards the hooded figure at the table—"has been making love to me and trying to take advantage of my helplessness."

"Are you the fellow who calls himself El Diablo Cojuelo?" demanded Tony, addressing the hooded figure. "Do you speak any English?"

"I am he who is known as El Diablo Cojuelo, señor, and I promise you that you will find me a veritable devil if you do not agree to my terms," answered Don Carlos. "Oh, yes, I speak English. How else could I have made love to the Señorita Rostrevor?"

"How dare you make love to Miss Rostrevor?" blustered Tony. "I warn you you shall suffer for this outrage. We are British subjects, and the British Government will make your confounded Spanish Authorities pay the penalty. Take off that hood thing and let's have a look at you."

It was a futile sort of speech, but Tony was conscious that he was at a disadvantage and he was trying to bluff.

"I am afraid the shock of seeing my face might be too much for you, señor," retorted Don Carlos, with a muffled laugh. "But I am willing to face you as man to man, if the idea is acceptable to you, and to fight you with such weapons as you may select, or without weapons. I flatter myself I am fairly proficient in your English sport of boxing, if you would prefer a fist fight rather than a duel with swords or pistols. I rather fancy we can settle this matter without calling for the intervention of the British Government!"

"What are you blathering about?" asked the astonished Tony. "Why do you want to fight me?"

"I am making you what an Englishman would surely call a sporting offer, señor," explained Don Carlos. "I will fight you for Miss Myra Rostrevor. If I beat you, you surrender her to me. If you beat me, I surrender her to you, set you both at liberty, and promise you safe conduct back to El Castillo de Ruiz without any question of payment of ransom, provided you give me your word of honour not to betray my identity, which I shall reveal to you. Is it a bargain?"

"But—but—hang it all!—the whole thing's fantastic!" stammered Tony, more bewildered than ever. "Why should I take the risk of having to surrender Miss Rostrevor to you? It is an absurd proposal, although you may think it is a sporty offer. I'm not afraid to fight you, but I've got to consider Miss Rostrevor."

"Does this proposal appeal to Miss Rostrevor?" inquired Don Carlos, turning his hooded head in Myra's direction. "It is possible that the risk of becoming the property of El Diablo Cojuelo is not altogether distasteful to her!"

Myra did not know how to answer. She felt inclined to bid Tony accept the offer, yet she knew it would be an unwomanly thing to do. Instinctively she felt, moreover, that in a fight Don Carlos would prove the victor.

"The risk is distasteful to me," she equivocated, after a pause.

"You seem to forget that you are completely at my mercy," remarked Don Carlos drily. "It is an act of grace on my part to offer Señor Standish the opportunity of fighting for you."

"Here, cut out this nonsensical talk and drop your pose of being a sportsman," interposed Standish. "What's the idea, anyhow? It's heads you win and tails I lose, I suppose, if it comes to fighting you. If I beat you, one of your gang of cut-throat ruffians would probably knife me. I see through your bluff, my man. You are pretending that you want to keep Miss Rostrevor with the idea of extorting a bigger ransom."

"You insult me!" thundered Don Carlos, springing up from his chair and bringing his clenched fist down on the table with a crash. "El Diablo Cojuelo has never broken his word and has kept his every promise, yet you dare to suggest he would not fight fair. Let me insult you in return, Señor Standish, by suggesting you are too much of a coward to fight for the girl you profess to love, and would surrender her rather than suffer pain."

"Confound you, you ruffian! How dare you talk to me in that fashion!" burst out Tony, forgetting his position, and taking an impulsive step forward—only to be seized roughly by his guards, one of whom jabbed the point of a knife against his breast. Tony flinched, then he shrugged his shoulders and faced the hooded figure disdainfully.

"Easy to take the high hand and to fling insults at a man when you have a lot of armed ruffians to protect you!" he said sarcastically. "What's the idea, anyhow? Why not get down to business instead of spouting a lot of balderdash?"

"I can dispense with the protection of the guards," Don Carlos remarked. "Garcilaso and Riafio, you will withdraw and leave me to deal with the señor. Wait outside," he added in Spanish.

He resumed his seat as the guards left the room, and Myra could see his eyes gleaming like black diamonds through the slits in his mask.

"Well, how much will you take to set Miss Rostrevor at liberty?" inquired Tony impatiently, after a pause. "I am sick of all this bluff and nonsense, being brought here blind-folded, and all that sort of thing, by another fellow dressed like you. The whole thing seems to me a fake, and it seems to me you must be in league with the authorities, else how could you have a place like this—electric light and all the rest of it—without being spotted?"

"Strange, is it not, Señor Standish?" responded Don Carlos, and his muffled voice had laughter in it. "Yet I assure you I am not in league with the authorities, and even Don Carlos, who prides himself on knowing practically every foot of the mountain range, failed to find my stronghold. Even a Division of your wonderful British Army and all your Scotland Yard would not discover the nest of El Diablo Cojuelo. You and Miss Rostrevor are as completely lost to the world here, and as helpless as you would be if the earth had swallowed you up."

"Oh, I quite realise you are in a position to dictate terms at present, if that's what you are getting at?" Tony exclaimed. "Why not get down to business without all this palaver? Look here, I'll pay you 10,000 pesetas to set Miss Rostrevor at liberty and give her safe conduct back to the Castle de Ruiz."

"Ten thousand pesetas," repeated Don Carlos. "Dios! Ten thousand pesetas! Miss Rostrevor, I congratulate you! Ten thousand pesetas are the Spanish equivalent of about sixty pounds, in English money. You see what a fabulous value your lover places on you. Sixty pounds! You must indeed feel flattered!"

Tony Standish's face crimsoned in annoyance, and a vicious expression flashed into his pale blue eyes.

"How much do you want?" he snapped.

Don Carlos did not answer. He rose from the table and walked to and fro, reiterating:

"Ten thousand pesetas—sixty pounds!"

Tony cursed under his breath, then his glance fell on the automatic pistol lying on the table, and he snatched it up and levelled it at his captor.

"Hands up, or I'll put a bullet through you!" he cried excitedly.

"Ten thousand pesetas—sixty pounds!" sneered Don Carlos again, paying no heed to the pistol levelled at him. "So that is the value you place on the woman you profess to love!"

Stung to fury and scarcely realising what he was doing, Tony Standish fired, but the shot did not seem to take effect, and before he could fire a second time Myra sprang at him and snatched the pistol from his hand. As she did so, the two guards dashed into the room, grappled with Tony and bore him to

the floor. One of them put a knife to the Englishman's throat, and twisted round his head to call out something to his master.

"No, not now," said Don Carlos shortly, in Spanish. "Take him away, manacle him, and guard him closely."

The men dragged Standish to his feet and hustled him out of the room, and as they did so Don Carlos reeled, a gasping cry broke from him, and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

CHAPTER XV

Trembling with excitement and agitation, dazed by the suddenness of the seeming tragedy, Myra stood rigid for a few moments, then threw aside the pistol she had snatched from Tony and ran to Don Carlos, flinging herself down on her knees beside him, and tearing off his cowl with shaking hands.

"Are you badly hurt?" she cried breathlessly, horrified to see that Don Carlos's pale face was contorted in pain and his eyes were closed. "Where are you wounded, Don Carlos? Shall I call for Mother Dolores?"

There was no response save a low moan, Don Carlos's limbs stretched out as if they were stiffening into the rigour of death, and his head sagged back as Myra tried to raise it. Temporarily, Myra completely lost her head.

"Speak to me, Don Carlos," she gasped brokenly. "Open your eyes and look at me, darling. Oh, surely, surely you can't be going to die! What can I do? Oh, my dear, my dear—"

Her voice failed her, she tried to cry out for help but sobs choked her utterance. Don Carlos's eyes fluttered open for a moment then closed again.

"Kiss me, Myra darling," he moaned faintly. "Kiss me, my sweet love."

Quivering with emotion, Myra bent down and pressed her trembling lips to his—and immediately found herself encircled by two strong arms, found the eyes of the "dying" man open and glowing with life and ardour, found herself crushed in a close embrace, and being kissed, and kissed, and kissed.

She struggled, broke free, and scrambled to her feet, her brain in a turmoil, and almost instantly Don Carlos also was on his feet, laughing exultantly.

"Myra, darling, surely you can no longer persist in pretending you do not love me," he exclaimed breathlessly. "If you hated me, as you professed, you would have let Standish try to fire a second time. I have put you to the test and proved that you love me."

Myra, agitated, bewildered, torn by conflicting emotions, gazed at him wide-eyed.

"But—but aren't you wounded?" she stammered. "Have you only been pretending?"

"Only pretending, Myra, but I blame myself for not acting my part for a little longer," answered Don Carlos. "If only I had waited, pretending for a few minutes longer that I was dying, you would have confessed your love. But your kiss so fired my heart that I forgot my part."

He laughed again exultantly and made a movement as if to sweep Myra into his arms, but she recoiled from him hastily. Anger and resentment at having been fooled swiftly succeeded her bewilderment, and her blue eyes flashed her indignation.

"So you have only been making mock of me, playing a part as usual, to flatter your own vanity!" she exclaimed. "I am sorry now that Tony's aim was not truer, and that I prevented him from firing a second time."

"The result would have been just the same, Myra," Don Carlos responded. "The pistol was loaded with blank cartridges. I deliberately left it within the reach of Standish, to see if he would have the nerve to use it, and to see how you would behave if he fired at me. You must admit, Myra darling, that you showed more concern for me than for Standish, thereby proving that you love me best. Dear heart, I shall treasure the memory of the first kiss you gave voluntarily."

"I would kiss any ruffian who begged me to do so if I thought he was dying," said Myra. "You have no reason to flatter yourself on the success of your play-acting trickery."

"Myra, don't you think you have resisted me and the call of your heart long enough?" countered Don Carlos. "Must I take still stronger measures to induce you to surrender yourself voluntarily? What if I tell you that I propose to have Antony Standish branded with hot irons and scourged as a punishment for attempting to kill me, unless you give yourself to me?"

"You are talking melodramatic nonsense again," Myra protested. "You would surely not be guilty of such devilish cruelty!"

"El Diablo Cojuelo is capable of any devilry," Don Carlos retorted grimly. "Would you sacrifice yourself to save Standish if he were willing to accept your sacrifice?"

"I suppose I should have no alternative," replied Myra, after a pause. "But Tony would not accept my sacrifice. He is an Englishman, and will never be scared into surrendering me to one whom he believes to be a Spanish brigand and outlaw. He loves me."

"Unless I am much mistaken, he has not even begun to know the meaning of love," said Don Carlos. "Tell me, Myra, if my threat to have him flogged and branded makes him offer to surrender you to El Diablo Cojuelo in order to save himself, will you marry me?"

"If I thought he'd sacrifice me to an outlaw to save his own skin, I'd marry you in his presence," exclaimed Myra impulsively.

"That is a promise," said Don Carlos quickly. "You shall marry me in his presence if he proves himself a craven. I will see him again now and discover what is in his heart and mind—and I shall have a priest in readiness."

"Tony will not fail me," said Myra bravely, but her heart misgave her, and already she was repenting of her impulsive promise.

Don Carlos rang the bell, and gave some rapid orders to Garcilaso, who appeared in answer to the summons. The man at first apparently did not grasp what was required of him, but presently nodded understanding, withdrew and returned in a few minutes, accompanied by Riafio, who was carrying a pair of handcuffs and a coil of rope.

"What are the handcuffs for?" asked Myra apprehensively.

"They are for me, dear lady," explained Don Carlos, with a ghost of a smile. "It would not do to let Mr. Standish think that even El Diablo Cojuelo could manage to keep Don Carlos a prisoner without fettering him. Incidentally, I must give myself the appearance of having been roughly handled or Standish may smell a rat."

He flung off his coat as he spoke, tore off his collar and rumbled his hair, then ordered Riafio to handcuff him.

"Garcilaso and Riafio will now thrust me into the cell in which Mr. Standish is imprisoned, and he and I will have a little confidential talk about you and El Diablo Cojuelo," he resumed. "Standish naturally imagines that Don Carlos was captured at the same time as your charming self, and he will doubtless give me his confidence. It may be that he will be the more ready to surrender you when he learns that Don Carlos will be prepared to ransom you when Cojuelo has tired of you."

"More play-acting—and you are taking an unfair advantage again," commented Myra.

"You should thank me rather than blame me for putting Standish's love for you to the test," responded Don Carlos, with a shrug. "Pray make yourself comfortable until I return to call on you to redeem your promise. Adios!"

He gave more orders to his men, sternly bidding them restrain their mirth, for they were treating the affair as a huge joke, and both tried to assume an expression of ferocity as they marched him out.

Left alone, Myra flung herself down on the couch and pressed her hands to her burning cheeks.

"Oh, surely, surely he won't succeed in fooling or intimidating Tony into surrendering me," she whispered, feeling shaken to the depths. "I feel confident Tony won't give me up, and yet—oh, I wish I hadn't made that promise. I don't want to marry Don Carlos unless—oh, this is driving me crazy! What did he mean by saying Don Carlos might ransom me when Cojuelo had tired of me?"

It was fully an hour before Don Carlos reappeared, and Myra found the time of waiting and the suspense almost unbearable. She started convulsively to her feet as Don Carlos entered, and her heart seemed to miss a beat when she saw that he was smiling triumphantly.

"You are mine, Myra, mine!" he exclaimed exultantly, his dark eyes gleaming. "As I expected, Standish values himself and his own safety more than he values you, and he is ready to surrender you to El Diablo Cojuelo as the price of his freedom."

"I don't believe it! It can't be true!" protested Myra breathlessly. "Tony wouldn't be such a knave and coward. You have tricked him, I suppose, into saying something which you distort into an offer to surrender me."

"I repeat that Standish is now willing to leave you here at the mercy of Cojuelo, on condition that he is allowed to go scot free," said Don Carlos.

"I don't believe it! It can't be true!" Myra reiterated. "Take me to Tony and let me question him."

"Presently you shall have your wish, but first let me give you an account of my interview with Mr. Standish, so that you will know what questions to put to him," said Don Carlos. "Pray be seated, Myra, and calm yourself. Does the prospect of surrendering yourself to me so dismay your heart?"

Myra merely nodded, as she seated herself in the furthest corner of the couch. She did not know what to say or what to believe, and her blue eyes were dark with dread as she watched Don Carlos, who had assumed a nonchalant attitude. He put on the coat he had discarded before going to interview Standish, helped himself to a drink from a side table, and lit a cigarette before taking a seat facing Myra.

"Why, I wonder, do you persist in doubting me?" he said, slowly and deliberately. "What I have told you is true. I had myself thrust as a prisoner into the cell in which your dear Tony Standish is at present imprisoned. He welcomed me like a long-lost brother, told me what had happened, and asked me if I could help to arrange terms with Cojuelo."

He broke off with a laugh, flicked the ash from the end of his cigarette, and finished his drink. Myra, waiting almost breathlessly for him to continue, felt that she wanted to shake him for being so tantalisingly deliberate.

"I told him that I had had a conversation with Cojuelo, and that the brigand had told me he meant to kill him by inches and make him die a hundred deaths for having attempted to murder him," resumed Don Carlos at length. "I told him I could ransom him and get him away scot free, but only if he agreed to hand you over to Cojuelo as part of his ransom."

Again he paused, and Myra could not restrain her impatience.

"Well? Go on. Do you mean to tell me Tony agreed?" she asked. "Or have you to pause every now and again to invent a story?"

"To do him justice, I must tell you that Standish did not at once agree," answered Don Carlos, tossing away the butt of his cigarette. "His idea was that Cojuelo had only been bluffing, and that it was merely a question of offering him enough money. Incidentally, you were right in your estimate, Myra. He said he would pay anything up to ten thousand pounds as a ransom for you. When I told him Cojuelo would not part with you for one hundred thousand pounds, he said he'd see him damned first before he'd pay it. So now you know your market value, as rated by Mr. Antony Standish, who has an income, I understand, of something like a hundred thousand pounds a year!"

"So because Tony wasn't idiot enough to agree to pay more than ten thousand pounds as ransom, you are trying to make out he agreed to resign me and leave me to the tender mercies of Cojuelo?"

Don Carlos shook his head and lit another cigarette with exasperating deliberation.

"Dear Myra, it may wound your pride, but he has resigned you," he said. "His love did not stand the acid test. I told him it was not a question of money, that Cojuelo had fallen madly in love with you and was afire with desire to make you his own, but thought it might bring him bad luck to take a girl who was betrothed to another man, unless the other man agreed to surrender her to him, or, at least, give her her freedom. Mr. Standish protested that nothing would persuade him to surrender you to Cojuelo."

"And yet you have said he offered to give me up?"

"Hear me out, Myra. I did not say he offered to give you up. I said he was willing to surrender you—"

which is a distinction with a difference. When he protested that nothing would persuade him to surrender you to Cojuelo, I reminded him that the bandit had threatened to have him scourged and branded with hot irons, that he was absolutely at the devil's mercy, and I played on his fears. I warned him that Cojuelo was a man of his word and would surely torture him unless he renounced you. He quailed at that, and after some hesitation agreed that he had no alternative but to accept his freedom and leave you here."

"But that does not mean that he renounced me," objected Myra, as Don Carlos paused again.

"What else does it mean, Myra?" asked Don Carlos. "I told him Cojuelo is madly in love with you, as I have said, and that if he accepted his freedom the outlaw would take it as an indication he had given you up. Yet he is going. True, he talked about organizing a rescue party, swore he would kill Cojuelo if any harm came to you, and all that sort of thing, but that was mere empty talk. The whole point is, as I said in the first place, that he is prepared, in effect, to surrender you to El Diablo Cojuelo as the price of his own freedom and safety."

"I cannot—I will not—believe it," said Myra firmly, rising to her feet. "Not until I hear Tony say himself that he is prepared to renounce me will I believe it. Let me see him."

"As you will," said Don Carlos, rising and putting on his disguise. "I will take you to him. Let me remind you, however, of your promise not to reveal the fact that Don Carlos and El Diablo Cojuelo are one and the same. I hold you to both of your promises—and I have a priest waiting to marry us. Come!"

CHAPTER XVI

He led the way through rocky, winding passages to the great cave, in which his motley band were enjoying their evening meal with much loud talk and laughter. At sight of the cloaked and hooded figure of their master and his fair captive there was a sudden hush, however, and practically all the men sprang to their feet at once.

"Mendoza, the keys of the prisoner's cell, please," said Don Carlos. "The señorita wishes to speak to the Englishman."

An elderly man with some keys on a chain attached to his belt hurried forward at once, and unlocked a massive door giving access to a small apartment that looked as if it had been hewn out of the solid rock. It was unfurnished save for a straw mattress with a brown blanket for covering, and a rough wooden bench, on which, when the door was flung open, Antony Standish was seated dejectedly with his head between his hands.

He sprang up with a sharp intake of breath, looking pale, startled and dishevelled, at sight of Myra and the hooded figure he assumed to be El Diablo Cojuelo.

"Hullo! What's the idea now?" he asked quickly. "Why have you brought Miss Rostrevor here?"

"The señorita wishes to assure herself that what she has been told by Don Carlos de Ruiz is correct," explained El Diablo Cojuelo, in his disguised and muffled voice. "I, also, wish to hear you say that you are prepared to accept your freedom and go back with Don Carlos to his castle, leaving the señorita with me, resigning her to me as your ransom."

Myra found herself strangely calm, felt as if she had run through the whole gamut of emotions and exhausted them all.

"Tony, is it true you told Don Carlos that you were willing to go and leave me here at the mercy of this outlaw, who professes to be passionately in love with me?" she asked, scarcely recognising her own voice. "Is it true?"

"True? Er—er—why, of course not," answered Standish, nervously fingering his little sandy moustache. "I mean to say—er—what exactly did Don Carlos tell you?"

"That you are prepared to leave me here, knowing that El Diablo Cojuelo will force me to become his wife, and accept your own freedom rather than run the risk of punishment," said Myra. "You are

prepared to renounce me, Tony?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Tony, his face flushing duskiely. "Nothing of the sort! I distinctly told Don Carlos that nothing would induce me to surrender you to Cojuelo. Myra, darling, you know I would never think of doing such a thing."

"So you assert that Don Carlos lied?" demanded Cojuelo sternly. "You did not tell him you would accept your freedom and leave the señorita to me if I refrained from flogging you and branding you? Will you swear that on oath—on your sacred word of honour as an English gentleman?"

"Don Carlos must have misunderstood me," Standish responded, nervously licking his dry lips. "Look here, Cojuelo, drop this fooling and be sensible. I realise you've got the whip hand, so to speak, and can dictate your own terms. How much do you want? I told Don Carlos I am willing to pay you ten thousand pounds—that's something like a million pesetas in your money—to set Miss Rostrevor and me free. Think of it, man—a million, and——"

"You have not answered my question, Señor Standish," interrupted Cojuelo curtly. "Do you assert that Don Carlos de Ruiz lied when he said you were willing to accept your freedom and leave the Señorita Rostrevor to me? Will you meet Don Carlos face to face and denounce him as a liar?"

"Don Carlos must have misunderstood me," repeated Tony. "It—er—it isn't a question of calling him a liar. Look here, Cojuelo, what's the use of all this bluff and bluster? Why don't you come down to brass tacks and state your terms?"

"Don Carlos did not misunderstand you, and you are lying," Cojuelo rasped at him. "Confess now to the Señorita Rostrevor that you have renounced her."

"I shall do nothing of the sort, confound you!" Standish exclaimed angrily. "Why the deuce don't you state your terms and have done with it?"

"My terms were clearly dictated to you through the medium of Don Carlos," said Cojuelo. "I give you your freedom on condition that you renounce the Señorita Rostrevor and surrender her to me. Incidentally, the señorita has promised she will marry me if you renounce her."

"I made the promise, Tony, because Don Car—er—I mean El Diablo Cojuelo—boasted that you would surrender me to save yourself," interposed Myra hastily. "I knew nothing would induce you to give me up, Tony. It isn't true, is it, that you agreed to go away with Don Carlos and leave me here?"

"No, of course I didn't mean that, Myra," answered Tony, gulping as if he had a lump in his throat. "Didn't I come here to ransom you?"

"If Don Carlos lied, and you still refuse to renounce the señorita after you have been flogged and put to the torture, then I will set her free and you also," Cojuelo said grimly. "That is a promise, and Cojuelo never breaks a promise. Meanwhile I say again that you are lying, and that Don Carlos told the Señorita Rostrevor the truth."

"Here, I say, Cojuelo, cut out this bluff about torture and all that sort of nonsense," exclaimed Standish, with just a suspicion of unsteadiness in his voice. "I tell you I am prepared to pay any sum within reason as a ransom, and you won't get any more by threatening me with physical violence. Look here, I'm willing to apologise for having tried to shoot you, but you know you exasperated me by taunting me about not valuing Miss Rostrevor."

"What a charming piece of condescension on your part!" sneered Cojuelo. "If Don Carlos de Ruiz lied to the Señorita Rostrevor, I shall shoot him. That is another promise, señorita. As for you, perhaps the lash and the red hot iron on your flesh will induce you to speak truth as well as test your courage!"

He turned to the door, outside which the man with the keys was standing.

"Mendoza, order Perez, Riafio and Garcilaso to get ready the whipping post and make hot the branding irons at once," he commanded in Spanish, then repeated the order in English for the benefit of Standish, whose face went livid.

"Oh, surely you won't be so fiendishly cruel!" burst out Myra passionately. "If you dare to harm Tony —"

"We will withdraw, señorita, and leave Señor Standish to nerve himself for the ordeal that awaits him," interrupted Cojuelo, and hustled her out of the cell before she could say more. "I swear I did not lie to you, Myra," he resumed, as he clanged the door shut on the prisoner. "I am bluffing now, and have no intention of flogging or branding Standish, but only of scaring him into confessing that he is

willing to give you to me to save himself."

"And if he stands the test, if he refuses to give me up even when threatened with flogging and burning, you will keep your promise and set us both free?" asked Myra, after a breathless pause.

"Yes, assuredly—and I shall also keep my promise to shoot Don Carlos," was the grim reply. "Look, is it not a picturesque scene?" he added, with a change of tone.

The great cave, lighted by electricity, was certainly a remarkable sight, filled as it was with a picturesque crowd of men, some of them in what looked like stage costumes, nearly all chattering like excited children anticipating a treat as they watched some of their fellows erecting a whipping-post in the centre of the place, while another was busy working the bellows of what looked like a blacksmith's furnace and making irons red-hot. A scene a great artist might have loved to paint, yet the atmosphere was so sinister that Myra shivered involuntarily.

"You are frightened, señorita?" queried Don Carlos, and it seemed to Myra there was something mocking and sardonic in his tone. "In England, I remember, you were renowned for your courage and your love of adventure. Surely this is a great adventure?"

The remark stung Myra's pride, and her fair face flushed hotly.

"It disgusts and revolts me that you should try to terrorise a defenceless man to gratify your own vanity and humiliate me," she answered angrily. "As for being afraid, the remote prospect of having to marry you certainly frightens me."

Don Carlos made no answer, but strode across and talked rapidly to the men gathered round the whipping post and the furnace, evidently explaining to them at length what he wished them to do. Myra, of course, could not understand what was said, but she saw that some of the men laughed while others looked disappointed, and she concluded that Don Carlos was telling them that the preparations for the torture of the Englishman were all bluff.

"God grant that Tony's courage does not fail him, and that he stands the test," she whispered under her breath.

"It will be necessary for you to remain and witness the performance, señorita," said Don Carlos coldly, returning to her. "If I spared you the ordeal, you might again refuse to believe me when I reported the result."

"I wish to stay," Myra answered, and her red-gold head went up proudly. "My presence will give the man I love courage."

"It is a great gamble, and you, fair lady, are the stake," said Don Carlos. "The stage is set and our fate will be decided within a few minutes."

He nodded his cowed head, shouted some orders in Spanish to his men, and took up a position beside the whipping-post, which somewhat resembled an ancient pillory. Four men hurried to the cell in which Standish was confined, to reappear after the lapse of a few minutes with the prisoner between them.

They had stripped Standish to the waist, and he walked forward with firm step and head erect, but at the sight of the whipping-post and the furnace, and the sinister figure beside them with a cat-o'-nine-tails in his hand, he halted suddenly with an involuntary gasp, and his face went ashen.

"Cojuelo, you—you can't mean that you are going to be such a fiend as to torture me!" he burst out breathlessly. "I haven't done you any harm. Look here, I'll—I'll double the ransom if you'll let me off. I'll make it twenty thousand pounds."

"Not for fifty thousand pounds would I forego my vengeance," rasped the hooded figure. "Yet you have but to confess that you did agree to go away and leave the Señorita Rostrevor here, well knowing what would happen to her, you have only to tell her now that you renounce her to me, and I will let you go unharmed."

"Don't, Tony, don't!" cried Myra. "Be brave, dear!"

Standish, who had not previously noticed her, jerked round his head at the sound of her voice.

"Myra, for God's sake intercede for me," he screamed, and began to struggle violently as his guards seized him and began to drag him towards the pillory. "Beg him to spare me!"

"Oh, Tony, don't fail me!" cried Myra, shamed by his display of terror. "Don't be a coward! Be brave! Be British!"

Struggling, shouting, protesting and appealing frantically, his face livid and the sweat of fear pouring down it, Standish was dragged towards the stake.

"The burning irons first, I think," snarled Cojuelo. "The burns will make the lash more effective afterwards."

The man beside the furnace drew from the fire a branding iron, the end of which was red-hot, and made a threatening movement. Standish squealed like a rabbit caught in a trap.

"Don't! Don't!" he shrieked in a frenzy of terror. "Oh, spare me, spare me! I'll give her up. I—I can't face it. You can have her!"

"Do you still accuse Don Carlos of having lied?" demanded Cojuelo remorselessly. "Is it not true that you were willing to escape with him, or by his aid, and leave the señorita?"

"Yes, yes, it is true," gasped Standish. "I lied to Myra to try to—to save my face. Don Carlos said he would look after her. Let me go! Let me go!"

"You hear, señorita?" exclaimed Don Carlos, his voice ringing out triumphantly. "To save his own skin, your lover has renounced you.... Release the brave Englishman, my friends. The farce is over."

Nauseated by Tony's piteous exhibition of craven terror, Myra turned away from him in loathing and contempt as the men released him.

"Oh, you coward!" she burst out passionately. "I was so sure you would stand the test and would not fail me that I promised I would marry this devil in your presence if you were dastard enough to offer to give me to him to save your own skin. All these preparations for torture were only bluff to test your courage and your love. You have failed me, Tony, in my hour of greatest need, and I hate and despise you. I would give myself to any bandit now rather than marry you!"

"I hold you to your promise, señorita," cried Cojuelo. "You will marry me here and now in the presence of Señor Standish.... Come hither, Padre Sancho, and perform the marriage service."

A fat little bald-headed man, dressed in a greasy black cassock and carpet slippers, shuffled forward and addressed some questions to Myra in a wheezy voice.

"He is asking if you are willing to marry me," Cojuelo interpreted.

"Yes, I will keep my promise and marry you in the presence of the man who has failed me," said Myra, and flashed a glance at Standish that made him quail.

"Here, I say! I—I didn't realise it was bluff," faltered Standish. "I'll do anything... Cojuelo, I'll pay you fifty thousand if only you'll—"

"Proceed with the ceremony, Padre Sancho," interrupted Cojuelo; and the monk opened his book and began to gabble unintelligibly in his wheezy voice. Presently he paused and addressed a question to the hooded figure.

"I will," said Cojuelo, and took Myra's listless hand in his own. "You Myra, will also answer 'I will,' when the Padre asks you. This ring, which I took from the finger of Don Carlos de Ruiz, will serve for the present."

"Myra, for heaven's sake——" broke in Tony Standish, but Myra paid no heed to him.

"I will," she answered firmly, in response to the priest's unintelligible question.

It struck her suddenly that the priest did not appear to be treating the ceremony seriously, and the thought flashed into her mind that possibly "Padre Sancho" was only one of the brigands deputed by Don Carlos to play a part, and the whole proceeding was as much bluff as had been the preparations to torture Tony Standish.

"Is he fooling me again?" wondered Myra, as Padre Sancho gabbled through the rest of the service, closed his book and raised his right hand as if bestowing a blessing, whereupon some of the brigands behind and around him began to cheer. They cheered more lustily still when their hooded chief put his arm round Myra's shoulders with an air of possession.

"Mother Dolores will escort you to your room, Myra," said Don Carlos. "Forgive your bridegroom for

not accompanying you. I have to arrange for the release of Señor Standish."

CHAPTER XVII

Myra was infinitely glad to escape, and she flung herself down in a chair with a sigh that was half a sob when she reached her bedroom.

"You may go, Dolores," she said, and motioned away the old woman, who had been murmuring congratulations.

"Si, maestra, buena maestra," said Dolores smilingly, as she withdrew.

"Maestra?—That means 'mistress,'" ruminated Myra. "In what sense is it used? He used the word when he addressed his men after the mock-marriage. 'Nueva maestra,' I think he called me. That must mean 'new mistress.' His new mistress! How many mistresses have there been—and what is going to happen to me? ... Oh, why didn't Tony play the man!"

Time passed and the suspense was becoming almost unbearable when the sound of heavy footsteps in the rocky corridor made Myra's heart jump convulsively. She started to her feet as the door opened to reveal Don Carlos, still wearing his cowl. Behind him were Garcilaso and Mendoza with Standish, now fully dressed and with a bandage round his eyes, between them.

"Does the Señora Cojuelo wish to say farewell to the lover who renounced her?" inquired Don Carlos, with a note of mockery in his voice. "I am now about to redeem my promise and have him escorted back unharmed to the Castillo de Ruiz."

"Why are his eyes bandaged?" asked Myra sharply. "What has happened to him?"

"Nothing has happened," Don Carlos assured her. "The bandage is merely a precautionary measure. He was brought here blindfolded, so that he might have no idea as to the location of my mountain nest. He leaves blindfolded for the same reason. Don Carlos de Ruiz will follow him when I so choose. Have you anything to say to Señor Standish?"

"Nothing," answered Myra, after a moment of hesitation.

"Myra, if only——" said Standish hoarsely, and paused, gulping as if he were choking. "I suppose it isn't any use attempting to say anything," he added weakly.

"Except farewell," remarked Don Carlos ironically, and laid his hand on Myra's arm. "Permit me to escort you to the door, señora mia, to witness the departure of Señor Standish."

In the wake of Standish and his escort, he led Myra along the corridor to the outer hall, and Myra, her senses acute, watched him closely as he manipulated knobs which looked like part of the rocky wall and the great door that looked like rock itself swung open.

"Lead the English señor forward carefully, and remember I have pledged my word that he shall be returned safely to the castle of Don Carlos de Ruiz," said Don Carlos in Spanish. "Farewell, señor," he added in English. "You will have great stories to tell on your return to England of your encounter with El Diablo Cojuelo and how you escaped from him!"

Standish's face contorted in momentary passion, then with a sigh and a gesture of utter despair he submitted himself to be led away by Mendoza and Garcilaso. Myra, her face tense and white, took an involuntary step forward, and instantly Don Carlos's hand closed on her arm.

"You forget, dear lady, that you are the price of his freedom, and your place is with your husband," he said, as he drew her back into the hall and touched a lever which released the door.

To Myra the clang of the door as it shut seemed like a death-knell.

Don Carlos took off his cowl and flung it aside, smoothed his jet-black hair with his hands, and drew a long breath. His eyes and expression were inscrutable as he gazed fixedly at Myra.

"Exit Mr. Antony Standish," he said slowly, after a pause. "One chapter of your life is closed, Myra. Now another opens, the most wonderful chapter of all, in which you will fulfil your destiny."

Myra suddenly found herself cold and trembling, and to gain time and avoid Don Carlos's eyes she crossed the room to the radiator and held out her shaking hands to its warmth.

"Are you frightened, Myra mine?" asked Don Carlos gently crossing to her side. "Are you still afraid of love?"

"If this is your idea of love, I hate it!" responded Myra with sudden passion. "You have humiliated me until I feel that I am less than the dust. What greater humiliation could you inflict on any woman than to prove to her that the man who professed to love her would surrender her to a bandit? You have humiliated me as much as Tony Standish, and perhaps you have further humiliations in store."

"If you have a sense of proportion, you should thank me instead of reproaching me for proving Standish to be at heart a knave," Don Carlos retorted, the hard note creeping into his voice again. "If you tell me you still love him, and prefer him to me, I will send you back to him at once. Can you truthfully say that you still love him and would marry him if you were free?"

Myra shook her red-gold head despairingly, and sank down into a corner of the couch with a sigh.

"If he were the only man on earth, I would not marry him now," she answered. "But that does not alter the case or excuse your conduct."

"I do not understand, Myra," said Don Carlos. "It was only because you had promised to marry Standish that you hardened your heart against love and me. You have surrendered to love now, at last, and——"

"I have not," interrupted Myra. "I hate you for what has happened."

"Yet, hating me, you have become my wife," Don Carlos commented, with an air of perplexity.

"I am not your wife," protested Myra. "You have fooled me before, but you cannot fool me into believing that the farcical service, gabbled in a language I do not understand by one of your men masquerading as a monk, constitutes a marriage."

"Padre Sancho is an ordained priest. The ceremony was not a farce. You are now my wife—the wife of El Diablo Cojuelo, the outlaw. Later on, when you marry Don Carlos—if Don Carlos still desires you—you shall have a more elaborate ceremony, if you wish it, and you will be doubly married without being a bigamist."

There came an interruption at that moment. Madre Dolores appeared, murmuring apologies, with a tall glass of wine in her skinny hand, and seemingly made some appeal to Don Carlos.

"Myra, some of my men are holding festival to celebrate our marriage, and they have sent Mother Dolores to ask us to do them the honour of taking wine with them and allowing them to toast us," Don Carlos explained. "It would be a gracious act, which will endear you to all my men, to consent."

"But I have told you I cannot believe the marriage ceremony was other than a farce," objected Myra. "Is this another trick to humiliate me and make it appear I have surrendered?"

"Again you misjudge me," replied Don Carlos abruptly. "It is a compliment, and should be proof to you that my men know the marriage ceremony was no farce. They will take it as an affront if you refuse their invitation."

"What does that matter to me?" exclaimed Myra rebelliously.

Don Carlos's brows drew together and he looked chagrined.

"Tell the men, Mother Dolores, that the señora is either as lacking in courage as the Englishman, or considers them such a gang of cut-throat ruffians, that she cannot be persuaded to nerve herself to face them," he said, addressing the old woman. "Tell them she is aware she is affronting them and——"

"How dare you suggest I am a coward?" interrupted Myra, starting to her feet. "Tell them nothing of the sort, Dolores. I am not afraid to face them——"

"So we will be graciously pleased to accept the invitation," added Don Carlos as she paused.

"Yes," said Myra. "Otherwise, I suppose, you will taunt me with being a coward."

"I think I managed that rather cleverly, Myra," Don Carlos said, his face crinkling into a mischievous smile. "I thought you would not notice that I was giving my instructions to Mother Dolores in English,

of which she scarcely understands a word!"

Myra crimsoned in annoyance, but she made no retort, nor did she offer any protest when Don Carlos, after a few words of thanks to the puzzled Dolores, who scurried away, drew her hand through his arm and led her through the corridors to the great cave.

Dolores had spread the news of their coming, and every man was on his feet, glass or flagon in hand. Myra and Don Carlos were each handed a tall glass of wine, and the band drank their health with enthusiasm, shouting all sorts of good wishes. Don Carlos toasted them in turn, drained his glass, and called to Myra to follow his example.

"Drink to me and to love, Myra mine," he cried.

Myra was so confused by the shouting and by the men pressing around with uplifted glasses and flagons that she scarcely knew what she was doing and hurriedly swallowed the wine.

"Thank you, beloved," said Don Carlos, drawing her hand into the crook of his arm again. "We will go now."

Through the corridors they went again, and Myra's heart seemed to miss a beat as he paused at her bedroom and opened the door. She looked up at him with dread and appeal in her dilated blue eyes, to see him smiling exultantly.

"Mine! Mine at last, Myra!" he said in a low, vibrant voice, as he slipped his arm around her waist and drew her into the room. "The hour for which I have waited and craved."

"Don Carlos, is it useless to appeal to you to let me go?" gasped Myra. "Surely I have suffered enough without—without—this—?"

"Darling, why should you fear love now?" responded Don Carlos tenderly, enfolding her in his arms. "Let me fire your heart with the burning ardour of my passion. I have won you, and I swore I would, and I claim my reward. Myra, mia, I want you—want you!"

His dark eyes were ablaze with ardour, his lean face was flushed, and his breath was coming and going pantingly as he crushed Myra to him and kissed her until his kisses seemed to be burning her very Soul and her senses were reeling. All power of resistance had gone from her. She felt dazedly as if she were encompassed by flames and no hope of escape. She was conquered....

* * *

Languidly Myra opened her eyes—and sat up with an involuntary cry of consternation, for she could see nothing, and the terrifying thought flashed through her mind that she had gone blind. Then she remembered that the rocky apartment was dark as a tomb when the electric lights were not burning, and she groped for the switch.

As the lights sprang to life, realisation of what had happened burned its way into her horrified consciousness, and a burning blush stained her pale, lovely face. She was alone in the bedroom, but she knew instinctively that she had not been alone for long. Her hands went convulsively to her breast, and she shuddered violently and moaned in anguish.

Then followed anger—fierce, passionate fury against the man who had imposed his will on her, and with clenched fists she beat the pillow on which she knew his head had rested. The fury of rage speedily exhausted itself, and Myra buried her face in her hands and sobbed fearlessly.

"He will come back," she thought distractedly. "He will come back to make mock of me, to gloat over me. Oh, if only I could get away! If only I could die!"

She sprang out of bed and began to dress in frantic haste, starting at every sound. She could not have explained what she intended to do or the reason for her haste. All she knew was that she must get out of the bedroom before Don Carlos returned.

Her hurried toilet completed, Myra with trembling fingers cautiously opened the bedroom door and peeped out. The rocky corridor was deserted, no sound came from the great cave, and the whole place seemed almost uncannily silent. With an effort of will Myra mastered her panic and tiptoed silently along the corridor towards the outer hall.

The corridor was lighted, but she found the hall, when she reached it, in darkness, save for one tiny light above the electric switch on the wall near the entrance. Myra pressed the switch and at once the apartment was flooded with light.

"Oh, God, help me to remember!" breathed Myra, after a swift glance around, to assure herself the place was untenanted. "Help me to get away—if only it is to die among the mountains."

She had watched Don Carlos closely a few hours previously as he manipulated the levers which opened the secret door when giving Standish his freedom, and the thought had flashed into her mind that she could manipulate the levers as he had done, and escape into the outer world.

Her first attempt was a failure, and she bit her lips in chagrin and hurt her delicate hands tugging vainly at various knobs and slides. But again and again she tried, and at last, when she was about to give up in despair, she heard a sudden click and the great door swung open!

CHAPTER XVIII

With a gasp of relief, Myra darted out, negotiated the narrow crevice which hid the door from view, and found herself in the open—and in brilliant sunshine. She paused for a moment, to collect herself, fancied she heard a noise behind her, and sped away like a startled doe.

There appeared to be no path, and she ran aimlessly and without the slightest sense of direction, clambering over rocks and slithering down slopes, several times narrowly escaping disaster, and once only escaping from plunging headlong over a precipice by clinging frantically to a boulder on the very verge. And the boulder, which must have been balanced like a logan stone, went crashing over the side of the precipice the moment she had released her hold on it and recovered her equilibrium.

Although she had, as it were, been courting death, Myra was so terrified that she could not proceed for several minutes, and she had to muster up all her courage to negotiate the perilous path. After that, she advanced with greater caution, and at last reached a little grassy plateau, a sort of oasis amid the bleak rocks, commanding a magnificent view of the mountain range and the country.

Far below her, Myra could see a twisted white ribbon—so it looked from a distance—which she knew must be a road, and on the white ribbon were ant-like moving objects which she knew must be horses and men—the civil guard and the military, in all probability, seeking for her and for "El Diablo Cojuelo."

"If only I can get to them, I shall be safe," said Myra aloud. "Oh, if only I knew the easiest and quickest way down! I think I can see other men climbing up as if they had seen me... I wonder if they have seen me? I wonder if they could hear me if I called?" She had lost some of her sense of proportion, forgotten how far away the men must be, and she gathered her breath and shouted as loud as she could:

"Help! help!"

Almost instantly there came an answering shout, but to Myra's consternation the shout came from somewhere above her, and not from below. She looked round and upwards, but at first could see no one, then she heard the shout again, heard the voice of Don Carlos cry: "Myra, where are you?" saw a head appear over the side of a rocky ledge about fifty feet above her, and panic seized her again.

From the little plateau there ran for a distance a sort of natural path, and down this Myra fled as fast as her feet would carry her—which was not fast, for already her thin shoes were almost in ribbons, and one foot had been badly cut by a sharp stone. But she was scarcely conscious of the pain in her anxiety to escape.

She could hear Don Carlos shouting to her to stop, and fancied she could hear him in close pursuit as she sped down the steep path. Again she came to the edge of a ravine, and she had to creep cautiously along the edge of a rough and treacherous path.

Glancing over her shoulder after she had crossed the most perilous part, Myra saw that Don Carlos was now close behind her, and that she must inevitably be overtaken. Almost she succumbed to a mad impulse to hurl herself to destruction into the ravine, but in the moment of hesitation before taking the fatal plunge she heard the sound of many voices ascending.

A great boulder blocked her view of the mountainside immediately below her, but on rounding the rock she saw, within a hundred yards of her, a company of men in uniform advancing in straggling order up the mountain. Myra cried out breathlessly, some of the men saw her and shouted excitedly and one who seemed to be an officer came running towards her and reached her side just as Don

Carlos appeared behind her.

"Myra, Myra!" shouted Don Carlos. "Do not——"

Myra did not hear the rest of his shout. Excitedly she clutched the arm of the officer of the Guardia Civil.

"Save me! Save me!" she gasped. "That man is El Diablo Cojuelo! Don Carlos is El Diablo Cojuelo! Do you understand? Don't let him take me back."

"Yes, señorita," said the officer quickly in English. "I understand. You alla right now from El Diablo Cojuelo."

"You do not understand," gasped Myra half-frantically, pointing at Don Carlos, now only a few yards away from her. "That man is El Diablo Cojuelo. Don Carlos de Ruiz is El Diablo Cojuelo. Arrest him!"

It seemed to her that as she spoke the words denouncing Don Carlos the whole world went suddenly pitch dark, and she felt herself falling, falling through space. What actually happened was that she fainted, and the officer of the Civil Guard was just in time to catch her ere she fell.

She recovered consciousness to find a swarthy, weather-beaten man supporting her head and holding a water-bottle to her lips, and to see many dark eyes regarding her with sympathetic curiosity. Until her brain cleared she could not realise where she was and what had been happening, and she felt horribly scared. Then she heard the voice of Don Carlos and she remembered everything.

"Don't let him take me back!" she cried, sitting up. "I tell you, he is El Diablo Cojuelo!"

"Alla right, señorita, you secure from El Diablo Cojuelo now," said the officer.

"Yes, you are safe from El Diablo Cojuelo now, Myra," said Don Carlos, moving nearer, "and explanations can wait until we get to the Castle."

Myra realised that it would be rather absurd to continue to try to make the officer, who had but an imperfect knowledge of English, understand that Don Carlos and El Diablo Cojuelo were one man.

Still feeling faint and shaken, Myra was assisted down the mountain-side after a little while, and was eventually lifted on to a mule. The journey to the high road that ran through the heart of the Sierras was accomplished without untoward incident, and by great good fortune a motor car, carrying two high officials of the Guardia Civil, drove up just as the party reached the road. Into the car Myra and Don Carlos were invited, after some voluble explanations on the part of their escort, and were speedily conveyed to El Castillo de Ruiz.

"Welcome home, Myra, my wife," whispered Don Carlos, as he stepped out of the car and proffered his hand. "When you have recovered, we will discuss the question of taking vengeance on El Diablo Cojuelo," he added. "He is now entirely at your mercy."

"And I shall not spare him!" responded Myra.

* * *

"I am simply aching with curiosity, Myra," said Lady Fermanagh a few hours later. "Do, please, tell me everything. Tony has been talking strangely, and Don Carlos is reticent about what happened at the bandit's lair, but I suppose it was he who rescued you."

"Has he said so?" asked Myra.

She had collapsed on reaching the Castillo de Ruiz, but was now feeling better after a long rest, a warm bath, and a dainty meal.

"Not in so many words," answered Lady Fermanagh. "He seems desperately worried, and so does Tony, who says he will have to return to England to-morrow. I can't make out what has been happening, Myra. Do tell me."

"It is difficult to explain, Aunt," said Myra slowly, after much hesitation. "El Diablo Cojuelo professed to have fallen in love with me at first sight, and I was crazy enough to promise to become his wife if Tony offered to renounce me. Tony did renounce me when he was threatened with torture, and I was married to El Diablo Cojuelo in his presence last night. Tony failed me, and now I hate and despise him."

"Myra!" gasped Lady Fermanagh in horrified amazement. "Married to the brigand! You—you don't mean actually married?"

"I don't believe it could have been a proper marriage, although Don—er—Cojuelo swore the man who performed the service was an ordained priest," said Myra, avoiding her aunt's eyes. "I don't suppose it matters much now whether I am Cojuelo's wife—or only his mistress."

"His mistress!" Lady Fermanagh was white to the lips as she repeated the words. "You mean that he —?"

The hot colour stained Myra's pale face as she met her aunt's eyes, and nodded her red-gold head in shamed assent.

"Myra, you are ruined!" Lady Fermanagh almost wailed, wringing her be-ringed hands. "What madness possessed you to offer to marry the brigand?"

"He taunted me—and Tony failed me," Myra answered, oddly reluctant to explain everything. "I wish I were dead."

"Does Don Carlos know?" asked her aunt, and again Myra flushed as she nodded assent.

"Yes, he alone knows, Aunt," she said, "and he alone knows whether the marriage service was a mockery or not."

Lady Fermanagh, still wringing her hands, rose and paced agitatedly up and down the room, her nimble brain busy trying to think of some way of saving the situation.

"I will see Don Carlos, Myra, beg him to keep your secret, beg him to assert that the so-called marriage was a farce and a mockery," she announced suddenly, after a long pause. "He is a chivalrous gentleman, and I know he will lie if necessary, to save your honour.... Why do you sneer, child? ... Don't you realise that everything depends on Don Carlos, and how you behave towards Tony?"

"I have nothing but contempt for Tony now. I despise him."

"Don't be a little fool," snapped Lady Fermanagh. "Your only hope of saving yourself is to forgive Tony for his cowardice and marry him. He will be grateful to you all his life. Don Carlos can tell him that the marriage ceremony was only a farce, and that he arranged with the bandit for your liberation immediately afterwards, or else explain that he helped you to escape. How did you escape, by the way? You have not told me. Did Don Carlos help?"

"Don Carlos showed me the way to open the secret door," answered Myra. "Aunt Clarissa, nothing will induce me to marry Tony Standish now."

"But you must, you must!" insisted her aunt passionately. "It is the only way of saving yourself. Think how you are placed, and what a ghastly tragedy it would be if it became known that you had surrendered yourself to a brigand. I will see Don Carlos at once, beg him, for your sake——"

"No! no!" interrupted Myra, springing to her feet. "I will not permit it, aunt. On no account must you appeal to Don Carlos. I will see him myself. You do not understand."

"No, I certainly do not understand, and I think you must be crazy," responded her aunt, with an impatient sigh. "Oh, Myra, don't you realise in what a terrible position you have placed yourself? You lay the blame on Tony Standish, but now only he can save you."

"Tony Standish has nothing to do with the matter now," retorted Myra. "Only Don Carlos can save me. I beg you, Aunt Clarissa, not to make any appeal to him. Leave me to settle the matter myself with him and to decide my own fate, work out my own destiny. Shall I see him now or wait till morning?"

"I think you had better wait till morning, and take time to consider how you are placed," said Lady Fermanagh, after a thoughtful pause, regarding Myra searchingly. "I fancy your mind must be temporarily deranged. Myra, are you keeping something back from me?"

"Everything depends on Don Carlos—and Cojuelo," Myra responded, evading the question. "Please say nothing to him, aunt, until I have spoken to him alone."

"Oh, the whole affair seems a crazy nightmare, and I don't know what to make of it all," said her aunt, with another sigh. "I wish we had never come to this wretched, lawless place. You must have had a premonition of trouble when you at first refused Don Carlos's invitation for no particular reason. Myra, my dear, I am sorry for you!"

Her feelings got the better of her, and with tears in her eyes she flung her arms around Myra and hugged her close to her breast. And Myra suddenly broke down, buried her face in her aunt's shoulder, and cried like a hurt child.

"Better go to bed, dear," said Lady Fermanagh recovering herself after a few minutes. "We are all suffering from the strain and are not normal.... Go to bed, Myra, and try to make up your mind to go back to England with Tony to-morrow...."

CHAPTER XIX

Myra went to bed, but it was a long time before she could compose herself to woo sleep, so full was her mind of disturbing thoughts, so many problems did she find herself called on to solve.

"Does he love me?" That was the question that she put to herself time and again, and could not answer. "Do I love him?" was another. And at heart she knew that if she were certain that the answer to the first question was in the affirmative, she could answer the second in a like manner.

"What will it profit me if I denounce him?" she soliloquised. "He says he is at my mercy, but he can claim me, and boast that I offered to marry him, even if I do revenge myself by denouncing him. Always he seems to have the advantage of me. To save my 'honour' now, and satisfy Aunt Clarissa, I shall either have to humble myself to ask him to marry me publicly, or else forgive Tony. Either course is repugnant."

She fell asleep at last, but was wrestling with her problem even in her jumbled dreams. She woke with a start, and with the impression strong upon her that someone or something had touched her face and her breast. Scared, she groped for the electric switch and flashed on the light above the bed, and as she did so she remembered having awakened months previously at Auchinleven just in the same sort of fright, to find Don Carlos's note on her pillow.

Some odd instinct or intuition told her that history had repeated itself, and it came hardly as a surprise to find a half-sheet of notepaper tucked into her nightdress close to her heart. With fingers that trembled slightly, Myra unfolded the note and read:

"Give me your heart and love, my wife, and I will devote my life to you. If you have no love, show no mercy."

Myra read the words again and again, sorely puzzled to decide what exactly they meant, wondering, incidentally, why Don Carlos had not awakened her to whisper what he had to say instead of leaving a note on her breast.

"Is he ashamed or afraid?" she asked herself—and could not answer her own question, nor a score of other questions which she put to herself as she tossed about restlessly for the remainder of the night, unable to sleep.

Her aunt, in dressing-gown and slippers, came to her room while she was sipping her early morning cup of tea.

"I hope you slept well, Myra dear, and are feeling better," she said. "I have hardly slept at all, and feel a wreck. Have you made up your mind what to do?"

"Not quite," Myra answered. "I must see Don Carlos first. But I think I have decided to show no mercy to El Diablo Cojuelo."

"I don't know what you mean," commented her aunt. "For heaven's sake be sensible, Myra. It isn't a question of showing mercy to the brigand, but of saving yourself and your reputation. I shall be in agonies of anxiety until you have made a decision."

"I shall be in agonies myself until I have decided—and perhaps afterwards," replied Myra enigmatically. "I shall get up now and get the ordeal over as quickly as possible."

She wasted no time over her toilet, and save that she was very pale, she looked her usual lovely self as she left her room and walked towards the staircase. She halted for a moment in indecision as she saw Antony Standish on the landing, evidently waiting for her, then went on.

"I say, Myra, don't cut me," exclaimed Standish appealingly, nervously fingering his tie. "I've been waiting for you. I—I don't want to try to excuse myself for what happened up in that cursed brigand's den. My nerve deserted me completely."

"And you deserted me," interjected Myra coldly.

"You see, there was Don Carlos to be thought of as well as you, and—and I thought the only hope of being any help was to get away," Standish went on lamely. "Myra, I beg of you not to expose me to the world as a coward, and to forgive me. There are officials down below waiting to question you about what happened. They've been questioning me, and I'm afraid I didn't tell them the truth. Now they're questioning Don Carlos. From what I can make of it, someone has suggested that Don Carlos is in league with the brigand Cojuelo."

"Who suggested that?" asked Myra, with a convulsive start.

"I don't know, but the officials wanted to know if I saw Don Carlos at Cojuelo's place, and how I got away," Standish answered. "I told a lot of lies, and said that Cojuelo let me go when I promised to pay a ransom of fifty thousand pounds. Myra, you won't give me away and show me up? I'll shoot myself if you do. Myra, if you say nothing about my funking things, I'll swear never to breathe a word about your marrying the brigand fellow."

"That is indeed kind!" commented Myra ironically. "I do not propose to make public what happened if I can avoid it, but possibly El Diablo Cojuelo may tell."

Standish drew a breath of relief and wiped his moist brow.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll come down with you, if I may, and perhaps I may be able to help you through with the officials."

"I hardly think I shall need your help," responded Myra coldly.

For all her outward appearance of self-possession, she was trembling inwardly, and her heart was beating unsteadily as she went down to the hall, to find Don Carlos and three officers in somewhat elaborate uniforms engaged in earnest conversation around a table, beside which was also seated another officer whom Myra recognised as the one who had led the Guardia Civil who had rescued her.

All rose immediately she appeared, and bowed courteously, and the junior officer hastened to place a chair for her.

"You will pardon us for troubling you so soon after your ordeal, Miss Rostrevor, but it is necessary that we ask you some questions in regard to El Diablo Cojuelo," said one of the officers in excellent English.

Myra merely inclined her head and seated herself, darting a glance at Don Carlos. His face was pale and his expression was as impassive and inscrutable as a Sphinx.

"This officer, who led the company which found you in the mountains yesterday, states that you were then apparently running away from Don Carlos de Ruiz," continued the superior official. "He also states that he understood you to assert positively that Don Carlos is El Diablo Cojuelo. Is that so, señorita?"

"If you have no love, show no mercy." The words of the note she had found on her breast flashed back into Myra's mind in the fraction of a second that she hesitated before answering the question on which the fate of Don Carlos depended. And in that fraction of a second she found the answer to many questions she had put to herself.

"What an absurd suggestion!" she exclaimed with scarce a tremor in her voice. "The officer is quite mistaken, but the fault is probably mine. I was so agitated that I did not know what I was saying, and was obsessed with the idea that El Diablo Cojuelo was close behind me."

Don Carlos sprang to his feet with an exultant laugh.

"You hear, señors!" he exclaimed. "I thought it would be more convincing if I left it to Miss Rostrevor to assure you the fantastic suggestion is without foundation. Now I am willing to answer any questions and tell you everything. Are you satisfied now? The Señor Standish has told you that I was flung into the cell in which he was imprisoned after he had tried to kill Cojuelo, and that Cojuelo afterwards threatened to torture him and shoot me unless we agreed to his terms."

"Pardon, Don Carlos, but I am merely carrying out my duty," said the Commandante, and turned to Myra again. "Did you see Don Carlos as well as Cojuelo, señorita, while you were in the outlaw's den?"

he inquired.

"Yes, I saw them both together several times," answered Myra. "I heard Cojuelo threaten to shoot Don Carlos. It was Don Carlos who enabled me to make my escape, but I thought in my panic that it was Cojuelo who was trying to overtake me when I cried out to the officer of the Civil Guards."

"Is there, then, some resemblance between Don Carlos and the brigand Cojuelo?" asked the Commandante.

Momentarily nonplussed, Myra shook her head.

"I cannot tell," she answered. "El Diablo Cojuelo always wore a cowl which disguised him."

"Yes, that's right, sir," broke in Tony Standish from the background. "We never saw the blighter without his cowl. I challenged him to be a man and meet me face to face, but he would not remove his disguise. You can take it from me, sir, that the idea that there was any connection between Cojuelo and Don Carlos is all moonshine."

"Thank you, Mr. Standish," said Don Carlos gravely, and glanced round at the faces of the officers. "May I take it, señors, that you are satisfied?"

The Commandante nodded, tugging at his grey moustache.

"Certainly, Don Carlos," he said. "You will understand that it was necessary for us to investigate the report that the English señorita had asserted that you were El Diablo Cojuelo, and that your refusal to deny the fact or to supply any explanation made this examination necessary. I understand that you may have considered the implication an insult, and now I can only apologise for troubling you and devote my energies to hunting down El Diablo Cojuelo. Can you offer us any assistance in locating his lair in the mountains?"

"You need trouble yourself no longer about El Diablo Cojuelo, señor," replied Don Carlos. "He is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, he is dead. Señor Standish, as he told you, fired at him and thought he had missed, but he had sorely wounded the brigand, and when I tackled Cojuelo afterwards, when he was endeavouring to prevent Miss Rostrevor from escaping, he collapsed and died at my feet. He will trouble us no more, señors, and I intend to claim his greatest treasure as my reward for having made an end to him."

"Don Carlos, but this is news indeed!" cried the Commandante excitedly. "El Diablo Cojuelo dead! Ten thousand congratulations, my dear Don Carlos! Congratulations to you, also, Señor Standish, on ridding my country of such a dangerous pest. To shoot a brigand in his own den was indeed conduct worthy of a gallant Englishman!"

"Oh—er—thanks," stammered Tony, avoiding looking at Myra. "Why the deuce didn't you tell us this before, Don Carlos?"

CONCLUSION

The officers had taken their leave after much handshaking and bowing. Left alone with Don Carlos, Standish, and with Lady Fermanagh, who had been a silent and puzzled witness of the proceedings, Myra suddenly felt her self-possession deserting her, and fled back to her own room.

"Why did I lie to save him?" she breathed, as she flung herself down on her knees by the bedside and buried her face. "Why?"

She did not need to ask the question. Her heart had given her the answer. She knew she had lied to save the man she loved.

There came a knock at the door, and she started up, hastily dabbing her eyes and trying to control herself.

"Come in," she called faintly, after a pause, as the knock was repeated.

The door opened, and Don Carlos entered. He was pale, but his dark eyes were shining with happiness.

"Myra, darling," he said huskily, and stopped, overcome by emotion.

He held out his arms.... Deep was calling unto deep. Love was calling. And Myra Rostrevor answered the call. She was in the arms of her lover, her conqueror, returning his passionate kisses with a fervour equal to his own.

"I love you, Carlos, I love you," she whispered between kisses. "I love you although you have been such a brute. If I had denounced you as El Diablo Cojuelo, what would have happened?"

"I should have confessed, then killed myself," Carlos answered. "Without you, beloved, life meant nothing to me. I staked all in the hope that you would prove you loved me, and I won! I feared that although I had made you mine I had failed to win your heart. Say again that you love me, dear heart, and will love me always."

"I love you, darling, I love you with all of me," Myra murmured, kissing him passionately. "I realise now that I have loved you for a long time, and was only afraid to confess myself conquered because I feared you only wanted to win me to gratify your pride.... Am I really your wife, dear?" she added, breathless and blushing, as she disengaged herself at last from his embrace.

"You are the wife of Cojuelo, or, rather the widow of Cojuelo, sweetheart," Carlos answered. "But now that poor Cojuelo is dead, you are going to marry Don Carlos de Ruiz, who has decided to give up playing at being an outlaw and devote his life to loving the most beautiful, delicious, adorable woman in the world. Kiss me again, beloved...."

"I don't know how to explain things, Carlos, to Lady Fermanagh, and don't know what she will think of us," said Myra, a little later. "And although it was nice of you to give credit to Tony for killing El Diablo Cojuelo, I shall feel dreadful when I have to tell him I am going to marry you."

"Don't worry, darling," said Don Carlos. "I have already told Lady Fermanagh and Mr. Standish that you promised to marry me if I saved you from El Diablo Cojuelo. Mr. Standish is leaving for home immediately, but Lady Fermanagh will remain for our wedding."

"You seem to have taken a great deal for granted, you wretch!" exclaimed Myra, dimpling into smiles. "As I know I am the wife of Cojuelo, I shall feel I am committing bigamy when I marry you, Carlos."

"And I shall have the satisfaction of marrying a second time the loveliest girl in the world," laughed Don Carlos happily, as he drew her unresisting into his arms again.

"I don't know what to make of it all, Myra, but I suppose it will be best not to ask too many questions," said Lady Fermanagh. "Rather odd, isn't it, that the brigand Cojuelo should have married you when he was mortally wounded, and that you should have promised to marry Don Carlos, yet married the brigand although you were engaged to Tony?"

"Yes, perhaps it does seem rather odd, aunt," admitted Myra, her eyes twinkling.

"Decidedly odd!" her aunt commented, with a wry smile. "I don't think the matter will bear very close investigation, and I suppose it concerns only Don Carlos and you. Incidentally, I don't know how Tony will explain matters in England, but I suppose that does not matter much either. Have you no regrets, Myra?"

"Yes," answered Myra, after a pause. "I think I rather regret losing my first husband. But I feel quite sure Carlos will prove a good substitute."

THE END

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