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**A BITTER HERITAGE**

By J. BLOUNDELLE-BURTON.

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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

**A BITTER HERITAGE**

*A MODERN STORY OF LOVE AND ADVENTURE*

BY

**JOHN BLOUNDELLE-BURTON**

AUTHOR OF THE SEAFARERS, FORTUNE'S MY FOE,

NEW YORK  
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY  
1899

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## A BITTER HERITAGE.

### [CHAPTER I.](#)

#### "YOU WILL FORGIVE?"

A young man, good-looking, with well-cut features, and possessing a pair of clear blue-grey eyes, sat in a first-class smoking compartment of a train standing in Waterloo Station--a train that, because there was one of those weekly race-meetings going on farther down the line, which take place all through the year, gave no sign of ever setting forth upon its journey. Perhaps it was natural that it should not do so, since, as the dwellers on the southern banks of the Thames are well aware, the special trains for the frequenters of race-courses take precedence of all other travellers; yet, notwithstanding that such is the case, this young man seemed a good deal annoyed at the delay. One knows how such annoyance is testified by those subjected to that which causes it; how the watch is frequently drawn forth and consulted, the station clock glanced at both angrily and often, the officials interrogated, the cigarette flung impatiently out of the window, and so forth; wherefore no further description of the symptoms is needed.

All things, however, come to an end at last, and this young man's impatience was finally appeased by the fact of the train in which he sat moving forward heavily, after another ten minutes' delay; and also by the fact that, after many delays and stoppages, it eventually passed through Vauxhall and gradually, at a break-neck speed of about ten miles an hour, forced its way on towards the country.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Julian Ritherdon, "thank goodness! At last there is a chance that I may see the dear old governor before night falls. Yet, what on earth is it that I am to be told when I do see him--what on earth does his mysterious letter mean?" And, as he had done half a dozen times since the waiter had brought the "mysterious letter" to the room in the huge caravansary where he had slept overnight, he put his hand in the breast pocket of his coat and, drawing it forth, began another perusal of the document.

Yet his face clouded--as it had done each time he read the letter, as it was bound to cloud on doing so!--at the first worst words it contained; words which told the reader how soon--very soon now, unless the writer was mistaken--he would no longer form one of the living human units of existence.

"Poor old governor, poor old dad!" Lieutenant Ritherdon muttered as he read those opening lines. "Poor old dad! The best father any man ever had--the very best. And now to be doomed; now--and he scarcely fifty! It is rough. By Jove, it is!"

Then again he read the letter, while by this time the train, by marvellous exertions, was making its way swiftly through all the beauty that the springtide had brought to the country lying beyond the suburban belt. Yet, just now, he saw nothing of that beauty, and failed indeed to appreciate the warmth of the May day, or to observe the fresh young green of the leaves or the brighter green of the growing corn--he saw and enjoyed nothing of all this. How should he do so, when the letter from his father appeared like a knell of doom that was being swiftly tolled with, for conclusion, hints--nay! not hints, but statements--that some strange secrets which had long lain hidden in the past must now be instantly revealed, or remain still hidden--forever?

It was not a long letter; yet it told enough, was pregnant with matter.

"If," the writer said, after the usual form of address, "your ship, the Caractacus, does not get back with the rest of the Squadron ere long, I am very much afraid we have seen the last of each

other; that--and Heaven alone knows how hard it is to have to write such words!--we shall never meet again in this world. And this, Julian, would make my death more terrible than I can bear to contemplate. My boy, I pray nightly, hourly, that you may soon come home. I saw the specialist again yesterday and he said---Well! no matter what he said. Only, only--time is precious now; there is very little more of it in this world for me."

Julian Ritherdon gazed out of the open window as he came to these words, still seeing nothing that his eyes rested on, observing neither swift flowering pink nor white may, nor budding chestnut, nor laburnum bursting into bloom, nor hearing the larks singing high up above the cornfields--thinking only again and again: "It is hard. Hard! Hard! To die now--and he not fifty!"

"And I have so much to tell you," he read on, "so much to--let me say it at once--confess. Oh! Julian, in my earlier days I committed a monstrous iniquity--a sin that, if it were not for our love for each other--thank God, there has always been that between us!--nothing can deprive the past of that!--would make my ending even worse than it must be. Now it must be told to you. It must. Already, because I begin to fear that your ship may be detained, I have commenced to write down the error, the crime of my life--yet--yet--I would sooner tell it to you face to face, with you sitting before me. Because I do not think, I cannot think that, when you recall how I have always loved you, done my best for you, you will judge me hardly, nor---"

The perusal of this letter came, perforce, to an end now, for the train, after running through a plantation of fir and pine trees, had pulled up at a little wayside station; a little stopping-place built to accommodate the various dwellers in the villa residences scattered all around it, as well as upon the slope of the hill that rose a few hundred yards off from it.

Here Julian Ritherdon was among home surroundings, since, even before the days when he had gone as a cadet into the Britannia and long before he had become a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, his father had owned one of those villas. Now, therefore, the station-master and the one porter (who slept peacefully through the greater part of the day, since but few trains stopped here) came forward to greet him and to answer his first question as to how his father was.

Nor, happily, were their answers calculated to add anything further to his anxiety, since the station-master had not "heard" that Mr. Ritherdon was any "wus" than usual, and the porter had "seed" him in his garden yesterday. Only, the latter added gruesomely, "he was that white that he looked like--well, he dursn't say what he looked like."

Mr. Ritherdon kept no vehicle or trap of any sort, and no cab was ever to be seen at this station unless ordered by an intending arrival or departing traveller on the previous day, from the village a mile or so off; wherefore Julian started at once to walk up to the house, bidding the porter follow him with his portmanteau. And since the villa, which stood on the little pine-wooded eminence, was no more than a quarter of a mile away, it was not long ere he was at the garden gate and, a moment later, at the front door. Yet, from the time he had left the precincts of the station and had commenced the ascent of the hill, he had seen the white face of his father at the open window and the white hand frequently waved to him.

"Poor old governor," he thought to himself, "he has been watching for the coming of the train long before it had passed Wimbleton, I'll be sworn."

Then, in another moment, he was with his father and, their greeting over, was observing the look upon his face, which told as plainly as though written words had been stamped upon it of the doom that was about to fall.

"What is it?" he said a little later, almost in an awestruck manner. Awestruck because, when we stand in the presence of those whose sentence we know to be pronounced beyond appeal there falls upon us a solemnity almost as great as that which we experience when we gaze upon the dead. "What is it, father?"

"The heart," Mr. Ritherdon answered. "Valvular disease. Sir Josias Smith says. However, do not let us talk about it. There is so much else to be discussed. Tell me of the cruise in the Squadron, where you went to, what you saw---"

"But--your letter! Your hopes that I should soon be back. You have not forgotten? The--the--something--you have to tell me.

"No," Mr. Ritherdon answered. "I have not forgotten. Heaven help me! it has to be told. Yet--yet not now. Let us enjoy the first few hours together pleasantly. Do not ask to hear it now."

And Julian, looking at him, saw those signs which, when another's heart is no longer in its normal state, most of us have observed: the lips whitening for a moment, the left hand raised as though about to be pressed to the side, the dead white of the complexion.

"If," he said, "it pains you to tell me anything of the past, why--why--tell it at all? Is it worth while? Your life can contain little that must necessarily be revealed and--even though it should do so--why reveal it?"

"I must," his father answered, "I must tell you. Oh!" he exclaimed, "oh! if at the last it should turn you against me--make you--despise--hate--"

"No! No! never think that," Julian replied quickly, "never think that. What! Turn against you! A difference between you and me! It is impossible."

As he spoke he was standing by his father's side, the latter being seated in his armchair, and Julian's hand was on the elder man's shoulder. Then, as he patted that shoulder--once, too, as he touched softly the almost prematurely grey hair--he said, his voice deep and low and full of emotion:

"Whatever you may tell me can make no difference in my love and respect for you. How can you think so? Recall what we have been to each other since I was a child. Always together till I went to sea--not father and son, but something almost closer, comrades----"

"Ah, Julian!"

"Do you think I can ever forget that, or forget your sacrifices for me; all that you have done to fit me for the one career I could have been happy in? Why, if you told me that you--oh! I don't know what to say! how to make you understand me!--but, if you told me you were a murderer, a convict, a forger, I should still love you; love you as you say you loved the mother I never knew----"

"Don't! Don't! For Heaven's sake don't speak like that--don't speak of her! Your mother! I--I--have to speak to you of her later. But now--now--I cannot bear it!"

For a moment Julian looked at his father, his eyes full of amazement; around his heart a pang that seemed to grip at it. They had not often spoken of his mother in the past, the subject always seeming one that was too painful to Mr. Ritherdon to be discussed, and, beyond the knowledge that she had died in giving birth to him, Julian knew nothing further. Yet now, his father's agitation--such as he had never seen before--his strange excitement, appalled, almost staggered him.

"Why?" he exclaimed, unable to refrain from dwelling upon her. "Why not speak of her? Was she----"

"She was an angel. Ah," he continued, "I was right--this story of my past must be told--of my crime. Remember that, Julian, remember that. My crime! If you listen to me, if you will hear me, as you must--then remember it is the story of a crime that you will learn. And," he wailed almost, "there is no help for it. You must be told!"

"Tell it, then," Julian said, still speaking very gently, though even as he did so it seemed as if he were the elder man, as if he were the father and the other the son. "Tell it, let us have done with vagueness. There has never been anything hidden between us till now. Let there be nothing whatever henceforth."

"And you will not hate me? You will--forgive, whatever I may have to tell?"

"What have I said?" Julian replied. And even as he did so, he again smoothed his father's hair while he stood beside him.

## **CHAPTER II.**

### **THE STORY OF A CRIME**

The disclosure was made, not among, perhaps, surroundings befitting the story that was told; not with darkness outside and in the house--with, in truth, no lurid environments whatever. Instead, the elderly man and the young one, the father and son, sat facing each other in the bright sunny room into which there streamed all the warmth and brilliancy of the late springtide, and into which, now and again, a humble-bee came droning or a butterfly fluttered. Also, between them was a table white with napery, sparkling with glass and silver, gay with fresh-cut flowers from the garden. It is amid such surroundings that, nowadays, we often enough listen to stories brimful with fate--stories baneful either to ourselves or others--hear of trouble that has fallen like a blight upon those we love, or learn that something has happened which is to change forever the whole current of our own lives.

It was thus that Julian Ritherdon listened to the narrative his father now commenced to unfold; thus amid such environment, and with a freshly-lit cigarette between his lips.

"You do not object to this?" he asked, pointing to the latter; "it will not disturb you?"

"I object to nothing that you do," Mr. Ritherdon replied. "In my day, I have, as you know, been a considerable smoker myself."

"Yes, in the days, your days, that I know of. But--forgive me for asking--only--is it to tell me of your earlier years, those with which I am not acquainted, that you summoned me here and bade me lose no time in coming to you?--those earlier days of which you have spoken so little in the past?"

"For that," replied the other slowly, "and other reasons. To hear things that will startle and disconcert you. Yet--yet--they have their bright side. You are the heir to a great----"

"My dear father!"

"Your 'dear father'! Ay! Your 'dear father'!" Once more, nay, twice more, he repeated those words--while all the time the younger man was looking at him intently. "Your 'dear father.'" Then, suddenly, he exclaimed: "Come, let us make a beginning. Are you prepared to hear a strange story?"

"I am prepared to hear anything you may have to tell me."

"So be it. Pay attention. You have but this moment called me your 'dear father.' Well, I am not your father! Though I should have been had all happened as I once--so long ago--so--so long ago--hoped would be the case."

"*Not--my--father!*" and the younger man stared with a startled look at the other. "Not--my--father. You, who have loved me, fostered me, anticipated every thought, every wish of mine since the first moment I can recollect--not my father! Oh!" and even as he spoke he laid his hand, brown but shapely, on the white, sickly looking one of the other. "Don't say that! Don't say that!"

"I must say it."

"My God! who, then, are you? What are you to me? And--and--who--am--I? It cannot be that we are of strange blood."

And the faltering words of the younger man, the blanched look that had come upon his face beneath his bronze--also the slight tremor of the cigarette between his fingers would have told Mr. Ritherdon, even though he had not already known well enough that such was the case, how deep a shock his words had produced.

"No," he answered slowly, and on his face, too, there was, if possible, a denser, more deadly white than had been there an hour ago--while his lips had become even a deeper leaden hue than before. "No. Heaven at least be praised for that! I am your father's brother, therefore, your uncle."

"Thank Heaven we are so near of kin," and again the hand of the young man pressed that of the elder one. "Now," he continued, though his voice was solemn--hoarse as he spoke, "go on. Tell me all. Blow as this is--yet--tell me all."

"First," replied the other, "first let me show you something. It came to me by accident, otherwise perhaps I should not have summoned you so hurriedly to this meeting; should have restrained my impatience to see you. Yet--yet--in my state of health, it is best to tell you by word of mouth--better than to let you find out when--I--am--dead, through the account I have written and should have left behind me. But, to begin with, read this," and he took from his breast pocket a neatly bound notebook, and, opening it, removed from between the pages a piece of paper--a cutting from a newspaper.

Still agitated--as he would be for hours, for days hence!--at all that he had already listened to, still sorrowful at hearing that the man whom he loved so much, who had been so devoted to him from his infancy, was not his father, Julian Ritherdon took the scrap and read it. Read it hastily, while in his ear he heard the other man saying--murmuring: "It is from a paper I buy sometimes in London at a foreign newspaper shop, because in it there is often news of a--of Honduras, where, you know, some of my earlier life was passed."

Nodding his head gravely to signify that he heard and understood, Julian devoured the cutting, which was from the well-known New Orleans paper, the Picayune. It was short enough to be devoured at a glance. It ran:

Our correspondent at Belize informs us by the last mail, amongst other pieces of intelligence from the colony, that Mr. Ritherdon (of Desolada), one of the richest, if not the richest, exporters of logwood and mahogany, is seriously ill and not expected to recover. Mr. Ritherdon came to the colony nearly thirty years ago, and from almost the first became extremely prosperous.

"Well!" exclaimed Julian, laying down the slip. "Well! It means, I suppose--that----"

"He is your father? Yes. That is what it does mean. He is your father, and the wealth of which that writer speaks is yours if he is now dead; will be yours, if he is still alive--when he dies."

Because, when our emotion, when any sudden emotion, is too great for us, we generally have recourse to silence, so now Julian said nothing; he sitting there musing, astonished at what he had just heard. Then, suddenly, knowing, reflecting that he must hear more, hear all, that he must be made acquainted now with everything that had occurred in the far-off past, he said, very gently: "Yes? Well, father--for it is you whom I shall always regard in that light--tell me everything. You said just now we had better make a beginning. Let us do so."

For a moment Mr. Ritherdon hesitated, it seeming as if he still dreaded to make his avowal, to commence to unfold the strange circumstances which had caused him to pass his life under the guise of father to the young man who was, in truth, his nephew. Then, suddenly, nerving himself, as it seemed to Julian, he began:

"My brother and I went to British Honduras, twenty-eight years ago, three years before you were born; at a time when money was to be made there by those who had capital. And *he* had some--a few thousand pounds, which he had inherited from an aunt who died between his birth and mine. I had nothing. Therefore I went as his companion--his assistant, if you like to call it so. Yet--for I must do him justice--I was actually his partner. He shared everything with me until I left him."

"Yes," the other said. "Yes. Until you left him! Yet, in such circumstances, why----?"

"Leave him, you would say. Why? Can you not guess? Not understand? What separates men from each other more than all else, what divides brother from brother, what----"

"A woman's love, perhaps?" Julian said softly. "Was that it?"

"Yes. A woman's love," Mr. Ritherdon exclaimed, and now his voice was louder than before, almost, indeed, harsh. "A woman's love. The love of a woman who loved me in return. That was his fault--that for which, Heaven forgive me!--I punished him, made him suffer. She was my love--she loved me--that was certain, beyond all doubt!--and--she married him."

"Go on," Julian said--and now his voice was low, though clear, "go on."

"Her name was Isobel Leigh, and she was the daughter of an English settler who had fallen on evil days, who had gone out from England with her mother and with her--a baby. But now he had become a man who was ruined if he could not pay certain obligations by a given time. They said, in whispers, quietly, that he had used other people's names to make those obligations valuable. And--and--I was away in New Orleans on business. You can understand what happened!"

"Yes, I can understand. A cruel ruse was practised upon you."

"So cruel that, while I was away in the United States, thinking always about her by day and night, I learnt that she had become his wife. Then I swore that it should be ruse against ruse. That is the word! He had made me suffer, he had broken, cursed my life. Well, henceforth, I would break, curse him! This is how I did it."

Mr. Ritherdon paused a moment--his face white and drawn perhaps from the emotion caused by his recollection, perhaps from the disease that was hurrying him to his end. Then, a moment later, he continued:

"There were those with whom I could communicate in Honduras, those who would keep me well informed of all that was taking place in the locality: people I could rely upon. And from them there came to New Orleans, where I still remained, partly on business and partly because it was more than I could endure to go back and see her his wife, the news that she was about to become a mother. That maddened me, drove me to desperation, forced me to commit the crime that I now conceived, and dwelt upon during every hour of the day."

"I begin to understand," Julian said, as Mr. Ritherdon paused. "I begin to understand." Then, from that time he interrupted the other no more--instead, both the narrative and his own feelings held him breathless. The narrative of how he, a newborn infant, the heir to a considerable property, had been spirited away from Honduras to England.

"I found my way to the neighbourhood of Desolada, stopping at Belize when once I was back in the colony, and then going on foot by night through the forest towards where my brother's house was--since I was forced to avoid the public road--forests that none but those who knew their way could have threaded in the dense blackness of the tropical night. Yet I almost faltered, once I turned back, meaning to return to the United States and abandon my plan. For I had met an Indian, a half-caste, who told me that she, my loved, my lost Isobel was dying, that--that--she could not survive. And then--then--I made a compact with myself. I swore that if she lived I would not tear her child away from her, but that, if--if she died, then he who had made me wifeless should himself be not only wifeless but childless too. He had tricked me; now he should be tricked by me. Only--if she should live--I could not break her heart as well.

"But again I returned upon my road: I reached a copse outside Desolada, outside the house



itself. I was near enough to see that the windows were ablaze with lights, sometimes even I saw people passing behind the blinds of those windows--once I saw my brother's figure and that excited me again to madness. If she were dead I swore that then, too, he should become childless. Her child should become mine, not his. I would have that satisfaction at least.

"Still I drew nearer to the house, so near that I could hear people calling to each other. Once I thought--for now I was quite close--that I could hear the wailing of the negro women-servants--I saw a half-breed dash past me on a mustang, riding as for dear life, and I knew, I divined as surely as if I had been told, that he was gone for the doctor, that she was dying--or was dead. Your father's chance was past."

"Heaven help him!" said Julian Ritherdon. "Heaven help him. It was an awful revenge, taken at an awful moment. Well! You succeeded?"

"Yes, I succeeded. She *was* dead--I saw that when, an hour later, I crept into the room, and when I took you from out of the arms of the sleeping negro nurse--when, God forgive me, *I stole you!*"

### CHAPTER III.

#### "THE LAND OF THE GOLDEN SUN."

The mustang halted on a little knoll up which the patient beast had been toiling for some quarter of an hour, because upon that knoll there grew a clump of *gros-gros* and moriche palms which threw a grateful shade over the white, glaring, and dusty track, and Julian Ritherdon, dropping the reins on its drenched and sweltering neck, drew out his cigar-case and struck a light. Also, the negro "boy"--a man thirty years old--who had been toiling along by its side, flung himself down, crushing crimson poinsettias and purple dracæna beneath his body, and grunted with satisfaction at the pause.

"So, Snowball," Julian said to this descendant of African kings, "this ends your journey, eh? I am in the right road now and we have got to say 'Good-bye.' I suppose you don't happen to be thirsty, do you, Pompey?"

"Hoop! Hoop!" grunted the negro, showing a set of ivories that a London belle would have been proud to possess, "always thirsty. Always hungry. Always want tobaccy. Money, too."

"Do you!" exclaimed Julian. "By Jove! you'd make a living as a London johnny. That's what they always want. Pity you don't live in London, Hannibal. Well, let's see."

Whereon he threw his leg over the great saddle, reached the ground, and began opening a haversack, from which he took a bottle, a packet, and a horn cup.

"Luncheon time," he said. "Sun's over the foremast! Come on, Julius Cæsar, we'll begin."

After which he opened the packet, in which was a considerable quantity of rather thickly cut sandwiches, divided it equally, and then filled the horn cup with the liquid from the bottle, which, after draining, he refilled and handed to his companion.

"I'm sorry it isn't iced, my lily-white friend," he said; "it does seem rather warm from continual contact with the mustang's back, but I daresay you can manage it. Eh?"

"Manage anything," the negro replied firmly, his mouth full of sandwich, "anything. Always----"

"Yes, I know. 'Thirsty, hungry, want tobacco and money.' I tell you, old chap, you're lost in this place. London's the spot for you. You're fitted for a more advanced state of civilization than this."

"Hoop. Hoop," again grunted the negro, and again giving the huge smile--"want----"

"This is getting monotonous, Sambo," Julian exclaimed. "Come, let's settle up;" whereon he again replenished the guide's cup, and then drew forth from his pocket two American dollars, which are by now the standard coin of the colony. "One dollar was the sum arranged for," Julian said, "but because you are a merry soul, and also because a dollar extra isn't ruinous, you shall have two. And in years to come, my daisy, you can bless the name of Mr. Ritherdon as that of a man both just and generous. Remember those words, 'just and generous.'"

The negro of many sobriquets--at each of which he had laughed like a child, as in absolute fact

the negro is when not (which is extremely rare!) a vicious brute--seemed, however, to be struck more forcibly by some other words than those approving ones suggested by Julian as suitable for recollection, and, after shaking his woolly head a good deal, muttered: "Ritherdon, Ritherdon," adding afterwards, "Desolada." Then he continued: "Hard man, Massa Ritherdon. Hard man, Massa Ritherdon. Hard man. Cruel man. Beat Blacky. Beat Whitey, too, sometimes. Hard man. Cruel man."

"Sambo," said Julian, feeling (even as he spoke still jocularly to the creature--a pleasant way being the only one in which to converse with the African) that he would sooner not have heard these remarks in connection with his father, "Sambo, you should not say these things to people about their relatives. *That* would not do for London;" while at the same time he reflected that it would be little use telling his guide of the old Latin proverb suggesting that one should say nothing but good of the dead.

"You relative of Massa Ritherdon!" the other grunted now, though still with the unflinching display of ivories. "You relative. Oh! I know not that. Now," he said, thinking perhaps it was time he departed, and before existing amicable arrangements should be disturbed, "now, I go. Back to Belize. Good afternoon to you, sir. Good-bye. I hope you like Desolada. Fifteen miles further on;" and making a kind of shambling bow, he departed back upon the road they had come. Yet not without turning at every other three or four steps he took, and waving his hand gracefully as well as cordially to his late employer.

"A simple creature is the honest black!" especially when no longer a dweller in his original equatorial savagery.

"Like it," murmured Julian to himself, "Yes, I hope so. Since it is undoubtedly my chief inheritance, I hope I shall!"

He had left Belize that morning, by following a route which the negro knew of, had arrived in the neighbourhood of a place called Commerce Bight--a spot given up to the cultivation of the cocoanut-tree. And having proceeded thus far, he knew that by nightfall he would be at Desolada--the dreary *hacienda* from which, twenty-six years before, his uncle had ruthlessly kidnapped him from his father--the father who, he had learnt since he arrived in the colony, had been dead three months. Also he knew that this property called Desolada lay some dozen miles or so beyond a village named All Pines, and on the other side of a river termed the Sittee, and, as he still sat beneath the palm-trees on the knoll where they had halted for the midday meal, he wondered what he would find when he arrived there.

"It is strange," he mused to himself now, as from out of that cool, refreshing shade he gazed across groves upon groves of mangroves at his feet, to where, sparkling in the brilliant cobalt-coloured Caribbean Sea, countless little reefs and islets--as well as one large reef-dotted the surface of the ocean, "strange that, at Belize, I could gather no information of my late father. No! not even when I told the man who kept the inn that I was come on a visit to Desolada. Why, I wonder, why was it so? My appearance seemed to freeze them into silence, almost to startle them. Why? Why--this reticence on their part? Can it be that he was so hated all about here that none will mention him? Is that it? Remembering what the negro said of him, of his brutality to black and white, can that be it? Yet my uncle hinted at nothing of the kind."

Still thinking of this, still musing on what lay before him, he adjusted the saddle (which he had previously loosened to ease the mustang) once more upon the animal's back. Then, as his foot was in the stirrup there came, swift as a flash of lightning, an idea into his mind.

"I must be like him," he almost whispered to himself, "so like him, must bear such a resemblance to him, that they are thunderstruck. And, if any who saw me can recollect that, twenty-six years ago, his newborn child was stolen from him on the night his wife died, it is no wonder that they were thunderstruck. That is, if I do resemble him so much."

But here his meditations ceased, he understanding that his name, which he had inscribed in the visitor's book lying on the marble table of the hotel, would be sufficient to cause all who learnt it to refrain from speaking about the recently dead man--his namesake.

"Yet all the same," he muttered to himself, as now the mule bore him along a more or less good road which traversed copses of oleanders and henna plants, allamandas and Cuban Royal palms--the latter of which formed occasionally a grateful shade from the glare of the sun--"all the same, I wish that darkey had not spoken about my father's cruelty. I should have preferred never to learn that he bore such a character. He must have been very different from my uncle, who, in spite of the one error of his life, was the gentlest soul that ever lived."

All the way out from England to New Orleans, and thence to Belize by a different steamer, his thoughts had been with that dear uncle--who survived the disclosure he had made but eight days--he being found dead in his bed on the morning of the ninth day--and those thoughts were with him now. Gentle memories, too, and kindly, with in them never a strain of reproach for what had been done by him in his hour of madness and desire for revenge; and with no other current of ideas running through his reflections but one of pity and regret for the unhappiness his real father must have experienced at finding himself bereft at once of both wife and child. Regret and sorrow, too, for the years which that father must have spent in mourning for him, perhaps in

praying that, as month followed month, his son might in some way be restored to him. And now he--that son--was in the colony; here, in the very locality where the bereaved man must have passed so many sad and melancholy years! Here, but too late!

Ere he died, George Ritherdon had bidden his nephew make his way to British Honduras and proclaim himself as what he was; also he had provided him with that very written statement which he had spoken of as being in preparation for Julian's own information in case he should die suddenly, ere the latter returned home.

"With that in your possession," he had said, two days before his death actually occurred, "what's there that can stand in the way of your being acknowledged as his son? He cannot have forgotten my handwriting; and even if he has, the proofs of what I say are contained in the intimate knowledge that I testify in this paper of all our surroundings and habits out there. That paper is a certificate of who you are."

"Suppose he is dead when I get there, or that he should have married again. What then?"

"He may be dead, but he has not married again. Remember what I told you last night. I know my brother has remained a widower."

"I wonder the paper did not also say that his son was stolen from him many years ago, or that there was no heir to his property, or something to that effect."

"It is strange perhaps that such a state of things is not mentioned. Yet, the Picayune's correspondent may have forgotten it, or not known it, or not have thought it worth mention--or have had other news which required to be published. Half a hundred things might have occurred to prevent mention of that one."

"And," said Julian, "presuming I do go out to British Honduras if I can get leave from the Admiralty, on 'urgent private affairs'----"

"You *must* go out. It is a fortune for you. Your father cannot be worth less than forty thousand pounds. You *must* go out, even though you have to leave the navy to do so."

Julian vowed inwardly that in no circumstances should the latter happen, while, at the same time, he thought it by no means unlikely that the necessary leave would be granted. He had already fifty days' leave standing to his credit, and he knew that not only his captain, but all his superiors in the service, thought well of him. The "urgent private affairs," when properly explained to their lordships, would make that matter easy.

"When I go to British Honduras, then," said Julian, putting now the question which he had been about to ask in a slightly different form, but asking it nevertheless, "what am I to do supposing he is dead? I may have many obstacles to encounter--to overcome."

"There can be none--few at least, and none that will be insurmountable. I had you baptised at New Orleans as his son, and, with my papers, you will find the certificate of that baptism, while the papers themselves will explain all. Meanwhile, make your preparations for setting out. You need not wait for my death---"

"Don't talk of that!"

"I must talk of it. At best it cannot be far off. Let us face the inevitable. Be ready to go as soon as possible. If I am alive when you set out, I will give you the necessary documents; if I die before you start, they are here," and as he spoke he touched lightly the desk at which he always wrote.

#### **CHAPTER IV.**

##### **AN ENCOUNTER**

And now Julian Ritherdon was here, in British Honduras, within ten or fifteen miles of the estate known as Desolada--a name which had been given to the place by some original Spanish settlers years before his father and uncle had ever gone out to the colony. He was here, and that father and uncle were dead; here, and on the way to what was undoubtedly his own property; a property to which no one could dispute his right, since George Ritherdon, his uncle, had been the only other heir his father had ever had.

Yet, even as the animal which bore him continued to pace along amid all the rich tropical

vegetation around them; even, too, as the yellow-headed parrots and the curassows chattered above his head and the monkeys leapt from branch to branch, he mused as to whether he was doing a wise thing in progressing towards Desolada--the place where he was born, as he reflected with a strange feeling of incredulity in his mind.

"For suppose," he thought to himself, "that when I get to it I find it shut up or in the occupation of some other settler--what am I to do then? How explain my appearance on the scene? I cannot very well ride up to the house on this animal and summon the garrison to surrender, like some knight-errant of old, and I can't stand parleying on the steps explaining who I am. I believe I have gone the wrong way to work after all! I ought to have gone and seen the Governor or the Chief Justice, or taken some advice, after stating who I was. Or Mr. Spranger! Confound it, why did I not present that letter of introduction to him before starting off here?"

The latter gentleman was a well-known planter and merchant living on the south side of Belize, to whom Julian had been furnished with a letter of introduction by a retired post-captain whom he had run against in London prior to his departure, and with whom he had dined at a Service Club. And this officer had given him so flattering an account of Mr. Spranger's hospitality, as well as the prominent position which that personage held in the little capital, that he now regretted considerably that he had not availed himself of the chance which had come in his way. More especially he regretted it, too, when there happened to come into his recollection the fact that the gallant sailor had stated with much enthusiasm--after dinner--that Beatrix Spranger, the planter's daughter, was without doubt the prettiest as well as the nicest girl in the whole colony.

However, he comforted himself with the reflection that the journey which he was now taking might easily serve as one of inspection simply, and that, as there was no particular hurry, he could return to Belize and then, before making any absolute claim upon his father's estate, take the advice of the most important people in the town.

"All of which," he said to himself, "I ought to have thought of before and decided upon. However, it doesn't matter! A week hence will do just as well as now, and, meanwhile, I shall have had a look at the place which must undoubtedly belong to me."

As he arrived at this conclusion, the mustang emerged from the forest-like copse they had been passing through, and ahead of him he saw, upon the flat plain, a little settlement or village.

"Which," thought Julian, "must be All Pines. Especially as over there are the queer-shaped mountains called the 'Cockscomb,' of which the negro told me."

Then he began to consider the advisability of finding accommodation at this place for a day or so while he made that inspection of the estate and residence of Desolada which he had on his ride decided upon.

All Pines, to which he now drew very near, presented but a bare and straggling appearance, and that not a particularly flourishing one either. A factory fallen quite into disuse was passed by Julian as he approached the village; while although his eyes were able to see that, on its outskirts, there was more than one large sugar estate, the place itself was a poor one. Yet there was here that which the traveller finds everywhere, no matter to what part of the world he directs his footsteps and no matter how small the place he arrives at may be--an inn. An inn, outside which there were standing four or five saddled mules and mustangs, and one fairly good-looking horse in excellent condition. A horse, however, that a person used to such animals might consider as showing rather more of the hinder white of its eye than was desirable, and which twitched its small, delicate ears in a manner equally suspicious.

There seemed very little sign of life about this inn in spite of these animals, however, as Julian made his way into it, after tying up his own mustang to a nail in a tree--since a dog asleep outside in the sun and a negro asleep inside in what might be, and probably was, termed the entrance hall, scarcely furnished such signs. All the same, he heard voices, and pretty loud ones too, in some room close at hand, as well as something else, also--a sound which seemed familiar enough to his ears; a sound that he--who had been all over the world more than once as a sailor--had heard in diverse places. In Port Said to wit, in Shanghai, San Francisco, Lisbon, and Monte Carlo. The hum of a wheel, the click and rattle of a ball against brass, and then a soft voice--surely it was a woman's!--murmuring a number, a colour, a chance!

"So, so!" said Julian to himself, "Madame la Roulette, and here, too. Ah! well, madame is everywhere; why shouldn't she favour this place as well as all others that she can force her way into?"

Then he pushed open a swing door to his right, a door covered with cocoanut matting nailed on to it, perhaps to keep the place cool, perhaps to deaden sound--the sound of Madame la Roulette's clicking jaws--though surely this was scarcely necessary in such an out-of-the-way spot, and entered the room whence the noise proceeded.

The place was darkened by matting and Persians; again, perhaps, to exclude the heat or deaden *sound*; and was, indeed, so dark that, until his eyes became accustomed to the dull gloom of the room--vast and sparsely furnished--he could scarcely discern what was in it. He was,

however, able to perceive the forms of four or five men seated round a table, to see coins glittering on it; and a girl at the head of the table (so dark that, doubtless, she was of usual mixed Spanish and Indian blood common to the colony) who was acting as croupier--a girl in whose hair was an oleander flower that gleamed like a star in the general duskiess of her surroundings. While, as he gazed, she twirled the wheel, murmuring softly: "Plank it down before it is too late," as well as, "Make your game," and spun the ball; while, a moment later, she flung out pieces of gold and silver to right and left of her and raked in similar pieces, also from right and left of her.

But the sordid, dusty room, across which the motes glanced in the single ray of sunshine that stole in and streamed across the table, was not--it need scarcely be said--a prototype of the gilded palace that smiles over the blue waters of the Mediterranean, nor of the great gambling chambers in the ancient streets behind the Cathedral in Lisbon, nor of the white and airy saloons of San Francisco--instead, it was mean, dusty, and dirty, while over it there was the fœtid, sickly, tropical atmosphere that pervades places to which neither light nor constant air is often admitted.

Himself unseen for the moment--since, as he entered the room, a wrangle had suddenly sprung up among all at the table over the disputed ownership of a certain stake--he stared in amazement into the gloomy den. Yet that amazement was not occasioned by the place itself (he had seen worse, or at least as bad, in other lands), but by the face of a man who was seated behind the half-caste girl acting as croupier, evidently under his directions.

Where had he seen that face, or one like it, before? That was what he was asking himself now; that was what was causing his amazement!

Where? Where? For the features were known to him--the face was familiar, some trick or turn in it was not strange.

Where had he done so, and what did it mean?

Almost he was appalled, dismayed, at the sight of that face. The nose straight, the eyes full and clear, the chin clear cut; nothing in it unfamiliar to him except a certain cruel, determined look that he did not recognise.

The dispute waxed stronger between the gamblers; the half-caste girl laughed and chattered like one of the monkeys outside in the woods, and beat the table more than once with her lithe, sinuous hand and summoned them to put down fresh stakes, to recommence the game; the men squabbled and wrangled between themselves, and one pointed significantly to his blouse--open at the breast; so significantly, indeed, that none who saw the action could doubt what there was inside that blouse, lying ready to his right hand.

That action of the man--a little wizened fellow, himself half Spaniard, half Indian, with perhaps a drop or two of the tar-bucket also in his veins--brought things to an end, to a climax.

For the other man whose face was puzzling Julian Ritherdon's brain, and puzzling him with a bewilderment that was almost weird and uncanny, suddenly sprang up from beside, or rather behind, the girl croupier and cried--

"Stop it! Cease, I say. It is you, Jaime, you who always makes these disputes. Come! I'll have no more of it. And keep your hand from the pistol or----"

But his threat was ended by his action, which was to seize the man he had addressed by the scruff of his neck, after which he commenced to haul him towards the door.

Then he--then all of them--saw the intruder, Julian Ritherdon, standing there by that door, looking at them calmly and unruffled--calm and unruffled, that is to say, except for his bewilderment at the sight of the other man's face.

They all saw him in a moment as they turned, and in a moment a fresh uproar, a new disturbance, arose; a disturbance that seemed to bode ominously for Julian. For, now, in each man's hands there was a revolver, drawn like lightning from the breast of each shirt or blouse.

"Who are you? What are you?" all cried together, except the girl, who was busily sweeping up the gold and silver on the table into her pockets. "Who? One of the constabulary from Belize? A spy! Shoot him!"

"No," exclaimed the man who bore the features that so amazed Julian Ritherdon, "no, this is not one of the constabulary;" while, as he spoke, his eyes roved over the tropical naval clothes, or "whites," in which the former was clad for coolness. "Neither do I believe he is a spy. Yet," he continued, "what are you doing here? Who are you?"

Neither their pistols nor their cries had any power to alarm Julian, who, young as he was, had already won the Egyptian medal and the Albert medal for saving life; wherefore, looking his interrogator calmly in the face, he said--

"I am on a visit to the colony, and my name is Julian Ritherdon."

"Julian Ritherdon!" the other exclaimed, "Julian Ritherdon!" and as he spoke the owner of that name could see the astonishment on all their faces. "Julian Ritherdon," he repeated again.

"That is it. Doubtless you know it hereabouts. May I be so bold as to ask what yours is?"

The man gave a hard, dry laugh--a strange laugh it was, too; then he replied, "Certainly you may. Especially as mine is by chance much the same as your own. My name is Sebastian Leigh Ritherdon."

"What! Your name is Ritherdon? You a Ritherdon? Who in Heaven's name are you, then?"

"I happen to be the owner of a property near here called Desolada. The owner, because I am the son of the late Mr. Ritherdon and of his wife, Isobel Leigh, who died after giving me birth!"

## CHAPTER V.

### "A HALF-BREED NAMED ZARA."

To describe Julian as being startled--amazed--would not convey the actual state of mind into which the answer given by the man who said that his name was Sebastian Leigh Ritherdon, plunged him.

It was indeed something more than that; something more resembling a shock of consternation which now took possession of him.

What did it mean?--he asked himself, even as he stood face to face with that other bearer of the name of Ritherdon. What? And to this question he could find but one answer: his uncle in England must, for some reason--the reason being in all probability that his hatred for the deceit practised on him years ago had never really become extinguished--have invented the whole story. Yet, of what use such an invention! How could he hope that he, Julian, should profit by such a fabrication, by such a falsehood; why should he have bidden him go forth to a distant country there to assert a claim which could never be substantiated?

Then, even in that moment, while still he stood astounded before the other Ritherdon, there flashed into his mind a second thought, another supposition; the thought that George Ritherdon had been a madman. That was--must be--the solution. None but a madman would have conceived such a story. If it were untrue!

Yet, now, he could not pursue this train of thought; he must postpone reflection for the time being; he had to act, to speak, to give some account of himself. As to who he was, who, bearing the name of Ritherdon, had suddenly appeared in the very spot where Ritherdon was such a well-known and, probably, such an influential name.

"I never knew," the man who had announced himself as being the heir of the late Mr. Ritherdon was saying now, "that there were any other Ritherdons in existence except my late father and myself; except myself now since his death. And," he continued, "it is a little strange, perhaps, that I should learn such to be the case here in Honduras. Is it not?"

As he spoke to Julian, both his tone and manner were such as would not have produced an unfavourable impression upon any one who was witness to them. At the gaming-table, when seated behind the half-caste girl, his appearance would have probably been considered by some as sinister, while, when he had fallen upon the disputatious gambler, and had commenced--very roughly to hustle him towards the door, he had presented the appearance of a hectoring bully. Also, his first address to Julian on discovering him in the room had been by no means one that promised well for the probable events of the next few moments. But now--now--his manner and whole bearing were in no way aggressive, even though his words expressed that a certain doubt in his mind accompanied them.

"Surely," he continued, "we must be connections of some sort. The presence of a Ritherdon in Honduras, within an hour's ride of my property, must be owing to something more than coincidence."

"It is owing to something more than coincidence," Julian replied, scorning to take refuge in an absolute falsehood, though acknowledging to himself that, in the position in which he now found himself--and until he could think matters out more clearly, as well as obtain some light on the strange circumstances in which he was suddenly involved--diplomacy if not evasion--a hateful word!--was necessary.

"More than coincidence. You may have heard of George Ritherdon, your uncle, who once lived here in the colony with your father."

"Yes," Sebastian Ritherdon answered, his eyes still on the other. "Yes, I have heard my father speak of him. Yet, that was years ago. Nearly thirty, I think. Is he here, too? In the colony?"

"No; he is dead. But I am his son. And, being on leave from my profession, which is that of an officer in her Majesty's navy, it has suited me to pay a visit to a place of which he had spoken so often."

As he gave this answer, Julian was able to console himself with the reflection that, although there was evasion in it, at least there was no falsehood. For had he not always believed himself to be George Ritherdon's son until a month or so ago; had he not been brought up and entered for the navy as his son? Also, was he sure now that he was *not* his son? He had listened to a story from the dying man telling how he, Julian, had been kidnapped from his father's house, and how the latter had been left childless and desolate; yet now, when he was almost at the threshold of that house, he found himself face to face with a man, evidently well known in all the district, who proclaimed himself to be the actual son--a man who also gave, with some distinctness in his tone, the name of Isobel Leigh as that of his mother. She Sebastian Ritherdon's mother! the woman who was, he had been told, his own mother: the woman who, dying in giving birth to her first son, could consequently have never been the mother of a second. Was it not well, therefore, that, as he had always been, so he should continue to be, certainly for the present, the son of George Ritherdon, and not of Charles? For, to proclaim himself here, in Honduras, as the offspring of the latter would be to bring down upon him, almost of a surety, the charge of being an impostor.

"I knew," exclaimed Sebastian, while in his look and manner there was expressed considerable cordiality; "I knew we must be akin. I was certain of it. Even as you stood in that doorway, and as the ray of sunlight streamed across the room, I felt sure of it before you mentioned your name."

"Why?" asked Julian surprised; perhaps, too, a little agitated.

"Why! Can you not understand? Not recognise why--at once? Man alive! *We are alike!*"

Alike! Alike! The words fell on Julian with startling force. Alike! Yes, so they were! They were alike. And in an instant it seemed as if some veil, some web had fallen away from his mental vision; as if he understood what had hitherto puzzled him. He understood his bewilderment as to where he had seen that face and those features before! For now he knew. He had seen them in the looking-glass!

"No doubt about the likeness!" exclaimed one of the gamblers who had remained in the room, a listener to the conference; while the half-breed stared from first one face to the other with her large eyes wide open. "No doubt about that. As much like brothers as cousins, I should say."

And the girl who (since Julian's intrusion, and since, also, she had discovered that it was not the constabulary from Belize who had suddenly raided their gambling den), had preserved a stolid silence--glancing ever and anon with dusky eyes at each, muttered also that none who saw those two men together could doubt that they were kinsmen, or, as she termed it, *parienti*.

"Yes," Julian answered bewildered, almost stunned, as one thing after another seemed--with crushing force--to be sweeping away for ever all possibility of George Ritherdon's story having had any foundation in fact, any likelihood of being aught else but the chimera of a distraught brain; "yes, I can perceive it. I--I--wondered where I had seen your face before, when I first entered the room. Now I know."

"And," Sebastian exclaimed, slapping his newly found kinsmen somewhat boisterously on the back, "and we are cousins. So much the better! For my part I am heartily glad to meet a relation. Now--come--let us be off to Desolada. You were on your way there, no doubt. Well! you shall have a cordial welcome. The best I can offer. You know that the Spaniards always call their house 'their guests' house.' And my house shall be yours. For as long as you like to make it so."

"You are very good," Julian said haltingly, feeling, too, that he was no longer master of himself, no longer possessed of all that ease which he had, until to-day, imagined himself to be in full possession of. "Very good indeed. And what you say is the case. I was on my way--I--had a desire to see the place in which your and my father lived."

"You shall see it, you shall be most welcome. And," Sebastian continued, "you will find it big enough. It is a vast rambling place, half wood, half brick, constructed originally by Spanish settlers, so that it is over a hundred years old. The name is a mournful one, yet it has always been retained. And once it was appropriate enough. There was scarcely another dwelling near it for miles--as a matter of fact, there are hardly any now. The nearest, which is a place called 'La Superba,' is five miles farther on."

They went out together now to the front of the inn--Julian observing that still the negro slept on in the entrance-hall and still the dog slept on in the sun outside--and here Sebastian, finding the good-looking horse, began to untether it, while Julian did the same for his mustang. They were the only two animals now left standing in the shade thrown by the house, since all the men--including he who had stayed last and listened to their conversation--were gone. The girl,

however, still remained, and to her Sebastian spoke, bidding her make her way through the bypaths of the forest to Desolada and state that he and his guest were coming.

"Who is she?" asked Julian, feeling that it was incumbent on him to evince some interest in this new-found "cousin's" affairs; while, as was not surprising, he really felt too dazed to heed much that was passing around him. The astonishment, the bewilderment that had fallen on him owing to the events of the last half-hour, the startling information he had received, all of which tended, if it did anything, to disprove every word that George Ritherdon had uttered prior to his death--were enough to daze a man of even cooler instincts than he possessed.

"She," said Sebastian, with a half laugh, a laugh in which contempt was strangely discernible, "she, oh! she's a half-breed--Spanish and native mixed--named Zara. She was born on our place and turns her hand to anything required, from milking the goats to superintending the negroes."

"She seems to know how to turn her hand to a roulette wheel also," Julian remarked, still endeavouring to frame some sentences which should pass muster for the ordinary courteous attention expected from a newly found relation, who had also, now, assumed the character of guest.

"Yes," Sebastian answered. "Yes, she can do that too. I suppose you were surprised at finding all the implements of a gambling room here! Yet, if you lived in the colony it would not seem so strange. We planters, especially in the wild parts, must have some amusement, even though it's illegal. Therefore, we meet three times a week at the inn, and the man who is willing to put down the most money takes the bank. It happened to me to-day."

"And, as in the case of most hot countries," said Julian, forcing himself to be interested, "a servant is used for that portion of the game which necessitates exertion. I understand! In some tropical countries I have known, men bring their servants to deal for them at whist and mark their game."

"You have seen a great deal of the world as a sailor?" the other asked, while they now wended their way through a thick mangrove wood in which the monkeys and parrots kept up such an incessant chattering that they could scarcely hear themselves talk.

"I have been round it three times," Julian replied; "though, of course, sailor-like, I know the coast portions of different countries much better than I do any of the interiors."

"And I have never been farther away than New Orleans. My mother ca--my mother always wanted to go there and see it."

"Was she--your mother from New Orleans?" Julian asked, on the alert at this moment, he hardly knew why.

"My mother. Oh! no. She was the daughter of Mr. Leigh, an English merchant at Belize. But, as you will discover, New Orleans means the world to us--we all want to go there sometimes."

## CHAPTER VI.

### **"KNOWLEDGE IS NOT ALWAYS PROOF."**

If there was one desire more paramount than another in Julian's mind--as now they threaded a campeachy wood dotted here and there with clumps of cabbage palms while, all around, in the underbrush and pools, the Caribbean lily grew in thick and luxurious profusion--that desire was to be alone. To be able to reflect and to think uninterruptedly, and without being obliged at every moment to listen to his companion's flow of conversation--which was so unceasing that it seemed forced--as well as obliged to answer questions and to display an interest in all that was being said.

Julian felt, perhaps, this desire the more strongly because, by now, he was gradually becoming able to collect himself, to adjust his thoughts and reflections and, thereby, to bring a more calm and clear insight to bear upon the discovery--so amazing and surprising--which had come to his knowledge but an hour or so ago. If he were alone now, he told himself, if he could only get half-an-hour's entire and uninterrupted freedom for thought, he could, he felt sure, review the matter with coolness and judgment. Also, he could ponder over one or two things which, at this moment, struck him with a force they had not done at the time when they had fallen with stunning--because unexpected--force upon his brain. Things--namely words and statements--that might go far towards explaining, if not towards unravelling, much that had hitherto seemed inexplicable.

Yet, all the same, he was obliged to confess to himself that one thing seemed absolutely



incapable of explanation. That was, how this man could be the child of Charles Ritherdon, the late owner of the vast property through which they were now riding, if his brother George had been neither demented nor a liar. And that Sebastian should have invented his statement was obviously incredible for the plain and simple reasons that he had made it before several witnesses, and that he was in full possession, as recognised heir, of all that the dead planter had left behind.

It was impossible, however, that he could meditate--and, certainly, he could not follow any train of thought--amid the unflinching flow of conversation in which his companion indulged. That flow gave him the impression, as it must have given any other person who might by chance have overheard it, that it was conversation made for conversation's sake, or, in other words, made with a determination to preclude all reflection on Julian's part. From one thing to another this man, called Sebastian Ritherdon, wandered--from the trade of the colony to its products and vegetation, to the climate, the melancholy and loneliness of life in the whole district, the absence of news and of excitement, the stagnation of everything except the power of making money by exportation. Then, when all these topics appeared to be thoroughly beaten out and exhausted, Sebastian Ritherdon recurred to a remark made during the earlier part of their ride, and said:

"So you have a letter of introduction to the Sprangers? Well! you should present it. Old Spranger is a pleasant, agreeable man, while as for Beatrix, his daughter, she is a beautiful girl. Wasted here, though."

"Is she?" said Julian. "Are there, then, no eligible men in British Honduras who could prevent a beautiful girl from failing in what every beautiful girl hopes to accomplish--namely getting well settled?"

"Oh, yes!" the other answered, and now it seemed to Julian as though in his tone there was something which spoke of disappointment, if not of regret, personal to the man himself. "Oh, yes! There are such men among us. Men well-to-do, large owners of remunerative estates, capitalists employing a good deal of labour, and so forth. Only--only----"

"Only what?"

"Well--oh! I don't know; perhaps we are not quite her class, her style. In England the Sprangers are somebody, I believe, and Beatrix is consequently rather difficult to please. At any rate I know she has rejected more than one good offer. She will never marry any colonist."

Then, as Julian turned his eyes on Sebastian Ritherdon, he felt as sure as if the man had told him so himself that he was one of the rejected.

"I intend to present that letter of introduction, you know," he said a moment later. "In fact I intended to do so from the first. Now, your description of Miss Spranger makes me the more eager."

"You may suit her," the other replied. "I mean, of course, as a friend, a companion. You are a naval officer, consequently a gentleman in manners, a man of the world and of society. As for us, well, we may be gentlemen, too, only we don't, of course, know much about society manners."

He paused a moment--it was indeed the longest pause he had made for some time; then he said, "When do you propose to go to see them?"

"I rather thought I would go back to Belize to-morrow," Julian answered.

"To-morrow!"

"Yes. I--I--feel I ought not to be in the country and not present that letter."

"To-morrow!" Sebastian Ritherdon said again. "To-morrow! That won't give me much of your society. And I'm your cousin."

"Oh!" said Julian, forcing a smile, "you will have plenty of that--of my society--I'm afraid. I have a long leave, and if you will have me, I will promise to weary you sufficiently before I finally depart. You will be tired enough of me ere then."

To his surprise--since nothing that the other said (and not even the fact that the man was undoubtedly regarded by all who knew him as the son and heir of Mr. Ritherdon and was in absolute fact in full possession of the rights of such an heir) could make Julian believe that his presence was a welcome one--to his surprise, Sebastian Ritherdon greeted his remark with effusion. None who saw his smile, and the manner in which his face lit up, could have doubted that the other's promise to stay as his guest for a considerable time gave him the greatest pleasure.

Then, suddenly, while he was telling Julian so, they emerged from one more glade, leaving behind them all the chattering members of the animal and feathered world, and came out into a small open plain which was in a full state of cultivation, while Julian observed a house, large, spacious and low before them.

"There is Desolada--the House of Desolation as my poor father used to call it, for some reason of his own--there is my property, to which you will always be welcome."

His property! Julian thought, even as he gazed upon the mansion (for such it was); his property! And he had left England, had travelled thousands of miles to reach it, thinking that, instead, it was *his*. That he would find it awaiting an owner--perhaps in charge of some Government official, but still awaiting an owner--himself. Yet, now, how different all was from what he had imagined--how different! In England, on the voyage, the journey from New York to New Orleans, nay! until four hours ago, he thought that he would have but to tell his story after taking a hasty view of Desolada and its surroundings to prove that he was the son who had suddenly disappeared a day or so after his birth: to show that he was the missing, kidnapped child. He would have but to proclaim himself and be acknowledged.

But, lo! how changed all appeared now. There was no missing, kidnapped heir--there could not be if the man by his side had spoken the truth--and how could he have spoken untruthfully here, in this country, in this district, where a falsehood such as that statement would have been (if not capable of immediate and universal corroboration), was open to instant denial? There must be hundreds of people in the colony who had known Sebastian Ritherdon from his infancy; every one in the colony would have been acquainted with such a fact as the kidnapping of the wealthy Mr. Ritherdon's heir if it had ever taken place, and, in such circumstances, there could have been no Sebastian. Yet here he was by Julian's side escorting him to his own house, proclaiming himself the owner of that house and property. Surely it was impossible that the statement could be untrue!

Yet, if true, who was he himself? What! What could he be but a man who had been used by his dying father as one who, by an imposture, might be made the instrument of a long-conceived desire for vengeance--a vengeance to be worked out by fraud? A man who would at once have been branded as an impostor had he but made the claim he had quitted England with the intention of making.

Under the palms--which grew in groves and were used as shade-trees--beneath the umbrageous figs, through a garden in which the oleanders flowered luxuriously, and the plants and mignonette-trees perfumed deliciously the evening air, while flamboyants--bearing masses of scarlet, bloodlike flowers--allamandas, and temple-plants gave a brilliant colouring to the scene, they rode up to the steps of the house, around the whole of which there was a wooden balcony. Standing upon that balcony, which was made to traverse the vast mansion so that, no matter where the sun happened to be, it could be avoided, was a woman, smiling and waving her hand to Sebastian, although it seemed that, in the salutation, the newcomer was included. A woman who, in the shadow which enveloped her, since now the sun had sunk away to the back, appeared so dark of complexion as to suggest that in her veins there ran the dark blood of Africa.

Yet, a moment later, as Sebastian Ritherdon presented Julian to her, terming him "a new-found cousin," the latter was able to perceive that the shadows of the coming tropical night had played tricks with him. In this woman's veins there ran no drop of black blood; instead, she was only a dark, handsome Creole--one who, in her day, must have been even more than handsome--must have possessed superb beauty.

But that day had passed now, she evidently being near her fiftieth year, though the clear ivory complexion, the black curling hair, in which scarcely a grey streak was visible, the soft rounded features and the dark eyes, still full of lustre, proclaimed distinctly what her beauty must have been in long past days. Also, Julian noticed, as she held out a white slim hand and murmured some words of cordial welcome to him, that her figure, lithe and sinuous, was one that might have become a woman young enough to have been her daughter. Only--he thought--it was almost too lithe and sinuous: it reminded him too much of a tiger he had once stalked in India, and of how he had seen the striped body creeping in and out of the jungle.

"This is Madame Carmaux," Sebastian said to Julian, as the latter bowed before her, "a relation of my late mother. She has been here many years--even before that mother died. And--she has been one to me as well as fulfilling all the duties of the lady of the house both for my father and, now, for myself."

Then, after Julian had muttered some suitable words and had once more received a gracious smile from the owner of those dark eyes, Sebastian said, "Now, you would like to make some kind of toilette, I suppose, before the evening meal. Come, I will show you your room." And he led the way up the vast campeachy-wood staircase to the floor above.

Tropical nights fall swiftly directly the sun has disappeared, as it had now done behind the still gilded crests of the Cockscomb range, and Julian, standing on his balcony after the other had left him and gazing out on all around, wondered what was to be the outcome of this visit to Honduras. He pondered, too, as he had pondered before, whether George Ritherdon had in truth been a madman or one who had plotted a strange scheme of revenge against his brother; a scheme which now could never be perfected. Or--for he mused on this also--had George Ritherdon spoken the truth, had Sebastian---

The current of his thoughts was broken, even as he arrived at this point, by hearing beneath him on the under balcony the voice of Sebastian speaking in tones low but clear and distinct--by

hearing that voice say, as though in answer to another's question:

"Know--of course he must know! But knowledge is not always proof."

## CHAPTER VII.

### MADAME CARMAUX TAKES A NAP

On that night when Sebastian Ritherdon escorted Julian once more up the great campeachy-wood staircase to the room allotted to him, he had extorted a promise from his guest that he would stay at least one day before breaking his visit by another to Sprangers.

"For," he had said before, down in the vast dining-room--which would almost have served for a modern Continental hotel--and now said again ere he bid his cousin "good-night," "for what does one day matter? And, you know, you can return to Belize twice as fast as you came here."

"How so?" asked Julian, while, as he spoke, his eyes were roaming round the great desolate corridors of the first floor, and he was, almost unknowingly to himself, peering down those corridors amid the shadows which the lamp that Sebastian carried scarcely served to illuminate. "How so?"

"Why, first, you know your road now. Then, next, I can mount you on a good swift trotting horse that will do the journey in a third of the time that mustang took to get you along. How ever did you become possessed of such a creature? We rarely see them here."

"I hired it from the man who kept the hotel. He said it was the proper thing to do the journey with."

"Proper thing, indeed! More proper to assist the bullocks and mules in transporting the mahogany and campeachy, or the fruits, from the interior to the coast. However, you shall have a good trotting Spanish horse to take you into Belize, and I'll send your creature back later."

Then, after wishing each other good-night, Julian entered the room, Sebastian handing him the lamp he had carried upstairs to light the way.

"I can find my own way down again in the dark very well," the latter said. "I ought to be able to do so in the house I was born in and have lived in all my life. Good-night."

At last Julian was alone. Alone with some hours before him in which he could reflect and meditate on the occurrences of this eventful day.

He did now that which perhaps, every man, no matter how courageous he might have been, would have done in similar circumstances. He made a careful inspection of the room, looking into a large wardrobe which stood in the corner, and, it must be admitted, under the bed also; which, as is the case in most tropical climates, stood in the middle of the room, so that the mosquitoes that harboured in the whitewashed walls should have less opportunity of forcing their way through the gauze nets which protected the bed. Then, having completed this survey to his satisfaction, he put his hand into his breast and drew from a pocket inside his waistcoat that which, it may well be surmised, he was not very likely to be without here. This was an express revolver.

"That's all right," he said as, after a glance at the chambers, he laid it on the table by his side. "You have been of use before, my friend, in other parts of the world and, although you are not likely to be wanted here, you don't take up much room."

"Now," he went on to himself, "for a good long think, as the paymaster of the Mongoose always used to say before he fell asleep in the wardroom and drove everybody else out of it with his snores. Only, first there are one or two other little things to be done."

Whereon he walked out on to the balcony--the windows of course being open--and gave a long and searching glance around, above, and below him. Below, to where was the veranda of the lower or ground floor, with, standing about, two or three Singapore chairs covered with chintz, a small table and, upon it, a bottle of spirits and some glasses as well as a large carafe of water. All these things were perfectly visible because, from the room beneath him, there streamed out a strong light from the oil lamp which stood on the table within that room, while, even though such had not been the case, Julian was perfectly well aware that they were there.

He and Sebastian had sat in those chairs for more than an hour talking after the evening meal, while Madame Carmaux, whose other name he learnt was Miriam, had sat in another, perusing by the light of the lamp the Belize Advertiser. Yet, now and again, it had seemed to Julian as though, while those dark eyes had been fixed on the sheet, their owner's attention had been otherwise occupied, or else that she read very slowly. For once, when he had been giving a very guarded description of George Ritherdon's life in England during the last few years, he had seen them rest momentarily upon his face, and then be quickly withdrawn. Also, he had observed, the newspaper had never been turned once.

"Now," he said again to himself, "now, let us think it all out and come to some decision as to what it all means. Let us see. Let us go over everything that has happened since I pulled up outside that inn--or gambling house!"

He was, perhaps, a little more methodical than most young men; the habit being doubtless born of many examinations at Greenwich, of a long course in H.M.S. Excellent, and, possibly, of the fact that he had done what sailors call a lot of "logging" in his time, both as watchkeeper and when in command of a destroyer. Therefore, he drew from his pocket a rather large, but somewhat unbusinesslike-looking pocketbook--since it was bound in crushed morocco and had its leaves gilt-edged--and, ruthlessly tearing out a sheet of paper, he withdrew the pencil from its place and prepared to make notes.

"No orders as to 'lights out,'" he muttered to himself before beginning. "I suppose I may sit up as long as I like."

Then, after a few moments' reflection, he jotted down:

"S. didn't seem astonished to see me. (Qy?) Ought to have done so, if I came as a surprise to him. Can't ever have heard of me before. Consequently it was a surprise. Said who he was, and was particularly careful to say who his mother was, viz. I. S. R. (Qy?) Isn't that odd? Known many people who tell you who their father was. Never knew 'em lug in their mother's name, though, except when very swagger. Says Madame Carmaux relative of his mother, yet Isobel Leigh was daughter of English planter. C's not a full-bred Englishwoman, and her name's French. That's nothing, though. Perhaps married a Frenchman."

These little notes--which filled the detached sheet of the ornamental pocketbook--being written down, Julian, before taking another, sat back in his chair to ponder; yet his musings were not satisfactory, and, indeed, did not tend to enlighten him very much, which, as a matter of fact, they were not very likely to do.

"He must be the *right* man, after all, and I must be the wrong one," he said to himself. "It is impossible the thing can be otherwise. A child kidnapped would make such a sensation in a place like this that the affair would furnish gossip for the next fifty years. Also, if a child was kidnapped, how on earth has this man grown up here and now inherited the property? If I was actually the child I certainly didn't grow up here, and if he was the child and did grow up here then there was no kidnapping."

Indeed, by the time that Julian had arrived at this rather complicated result, he began to feel that his brain was getting into a whirl, and he came to a hasty resolution. That resolution was that he would abandon this business altogether; that, on the next day but one, he would go to Belize and pay his visit to the Sprangers, while, when that visit was concluded, he would, instead of returning to Desolada, set out on his return journey to England.

"Even though my uncle--if he was my uncle and not my father--spoke the truth and told everything exactly as it occurred, how is it to be proved? How can any legal power on earth dispossess a man who has been brought up here from his infancy, in favour of one who comes without any evidence in his favour, since that certificate of my baptism in New Orleans, although it states me to be the son of the late owner of this place, cannot be substantiated? Any man might have taken any child and had such an entry as that made. And if he--he my uncle, or my father--could conceive such a scheme as he revealed to me--or *such a scheme as he did not reveal to me*--then, the entry at New Orleans would not present much difficulty to one like him. It is proof--proof that it be----" He stopped in his meditations--stopped, wondering where he had heard something said about "proof" before on this evening.

Then, in a moment, he recalled the almost whispered words; the words that in absolute fact were whispered from the balcony below, before he went down to take his seat at the supper table; the utterance of Sebastian:

"Know--of course he must know. But knowledge is not always proof."

How strange it was, he thought, that, while he had been indulging in his musings, jotting down his little facts on the sheet of paper, he should have forgotten those words.

"Knowledge is not always proof." What knowledge? Whose? Whose could it be but his! Whose knowledge that was not proof had Sebastian referred to? Then again, in a moment--again suddenly--he came to another determination, another resolve. He did possess some knowledge that this man, Sebastian could not dispute--for it would have been folly to imagine he had been speaking of any one else but him--though he had no proof. So be it, only, now, he would

endeavour to discover a proof that should justify such knowledge. He would not slink away from the colony until he had exhausted every attempt to discover that proof. If it was to be found he would find it.

Perhaps, after all, his uncle was his uncle, perhaps that uncle had undoubtedly uttered the truth.

He rose now, preparing to go to bed, and as he did so a slight breeze rattled the slats of the green persianas, or, as they are called in England, Venetian blinds--a breeze that in tropical land often rises as the night goes on. It was a cooling pleasant one, and he remembered that he had heard it rustling the slats before, when he was engaged in making his notes.

Yet, now, regarding those green strips of wood, he felt a little astonished at what he saw. He had carefully let the blinds of both windows down and turned the laths so that neither bats nor moths, nor any of the flying insect world which are the curse of the tropics at night, should force their way in, attracted by the flame of the lamp; but now, one of those laths was turned--turned, so that, instead of being downwards and forming with the others a compact screen from the outside, it was in a flat or horizontal position, leaving an open space of an inch between it and the one above and the next below. A slat that was above five feet from the bottom of the blind.

He stood there regarding it for a moment; then, dropping the revolver into his pocket, he went towards the window and with his finger and thumb put back the lath into the position he had originally placed it, feeling as he did so that it did not move smoothly, but, instead, a little stiffly.

"There has been no wind coming up from the sea that would do that," he reflected, "and, if it had come, then it would have turned more than one. I wonder whether," and now he felt a slight sensation of creepiness coming over him, "if I had raised my eyes as I sat writing, I should have met another pair of eyes looking in on me. Very likely. The turning of that one lath made a peep-hole."

He pulled the blind up now without any attempt at concealing the noise it caused--that well-known clatter made by such blinds as they are hastily drawn up--and walked out on to the long balcony and peered over on to the one beneath, seeing that Madame Carmaux was asleep in the wicker chair which she had sat in during the evening, and that the newspaper lay in her lap. He saw, too, that Sebastian Ritherdon was also sitting in his chair, but that, aroused by the noise of the blind, he had bent his body backwards over the veranda rail and, with upturned face, was regarding the spot at which Julian might be expected to appear.

"Not gone to bed, yet, old fellow," he called out now, on seeing the other lean over the balcony rail; while Julian observed that Madame Carmaux opened her eyes with a dazzled look--the look which those have on their faces who are suddenly startled out of a light nap.

And for some reason--since he was growing suspicious--he believed that look to have been assumed as well as the slumber which had apparently preceded it.

## **CHAPTER VIII.**

### **A MIDNIGHT VISITOR**

"Not yet," Julian called down in answer to the other's remark, "though I am going directly. Only it is so hot. I hope I am not disturbing the house."

"Not at all. Do what you like. We often sit here till long after midnight, since it is the only cool time of the twenty-four hours. Will you come down again and join us?"

"No, if you'll excuse me. I'll take a turn or two here and then go to bed."

Whereon as he spoke, he began to walk up and down the balcony.

It ran (as has been said of the lower one on which Sebastian and Madame Carmaux were seated) round the whole of the house, so that, had Julian desired to do so, he could have commenced a tour of the building which, by being continued, would eventually have brought him back to the spot where he now was. He contented himself, however, with commencing to walk towards the right-hand corner of the great rambling mansion, proceeding as far upon it as led to where the balcony turned at the angle, then, after a glance down its--at that place--darkened length, he retraced his steps, meaning to proceed to the opposite or left-hand corner.

Doing so, however, and coming thus in front of his bedroom window, from which, since the blind was up, the light of his lamp streamed out on to the broad wooden floor of the balcony, he saw lying at his feet a small object which formed a patch of colour on the dark boards. A patch which was of a pale roseate hue, the thing being, indeed, a little spray, now dry and faded, of the oleander flower. And he knew, felt sure, where he had seen that spray before.

"I know now," he said to himself, "who turned the slat--who stood outside my window looking in on me."

Picking up the withered thing, he, nevertheless, continued his stroll along the balcony until he arrived at the left angle of the house, when he was able to glance down the whole of that side of it, this being as much in the dark and unrelieved by any light from within as the corresponding right side had been. Unrelieved, that is, by any light except the gleam of the great stars which here glisten with an incandescent whiteness; and in that gleam he saw sitting on the floor of the balcony--her back against the wall, her arms over her knees and her head sunk on those arms--the half-caste girl, Zara, the croupier of the gambling-table to which Sebastian had supplied the "bank" that morning at All Pines.

"You have dropped this flower from your hair," he said, tossing it lightly down to her, while she turned up her dark, dusky eyes at him and, picking up the withered spray, tossed it in her turn contemptuously over the balcony. But she said nothing and, a moment later, let her head droop once more towards her arms.

"Do you pass the night here?" he said now. "Surely it is not wholesome to keep out in open air like this."

"I sit here often," she replied, "before going to bed in my room behind. The rooms are too warm. I disturb no one."

For a moment he felt disposed to say that it would disturb him if she should again take it into her head to turn his blinds, but, on second considerations, he held his peace. To know a thing and not to divulge one's knowledge is, he reflected, sometimes to possess a secret--a clue--a warning worth having; to possess, indeed, something that may be of use to us in the future if not now, while, for the rest--well! the returning of the spray to her had, doubtless, informed the girl sufficiently that he was acquainted with the fact of how she had been outside his window, and that it was she who had opened his blind wide enough to allow her to peer in on him.

"Good-night," he said, turning away. "Good-night," and without waiting to hear whether she returned the greeting or not, he went back to the bedroom. Yet, before he entered it, he bent over the balcony and called down another "good-night" to Sebastian, who, he noticed, had now been deserted by Madame Carmaux.

For some considerable time after this he walked about his room; long enough, indeed, to give Sebastian the idea that he was preparing for bed, then, although he had removed none of his clothing except his boots, he put out the lamp.

"If the young lady is desirous of observing me again," he reflected, "she can do so. Yet if she does, it will not be without my knowing it. And if she should pay me another visit--why, we shall see."

But, all the same, and because he thought it not at all unlikely that some other visitor than the girl might make her way, not only to the blind itself but even to the room, he laid his right arm along the table so that his fingers were touching the revolver that he had now placed on that table.

"I haven't taken countless middle watches for nothing in my time," he said to himself; "another won't hurt me. If I do drop asleep, I imagine I shall wake up pretty easily."

He was on the alert now, and not only on the alert as to any one who might be disposed to pay him a nocturnal visit, but, also, mentally wary as to what might be the truth concerning Sebastian Ritherdon and himself. For, strange to say, there was a singular revulsion of feeling going on in his mind at this time; strange because, at present, scarcely anything of considerable importance, scarcely anything sufficiently tangible, had occurred to produce this new conviction that Sebastian's story was untrue, and that the other story told by his uncle before his death was the right one.

All the same, the conviction was growing in his mind; growing steadily, although perhaps without any just reason or cause for its growth. Meanwhile, his ears now told him that, although Madame Carmaux was absent when he glanced over the balcony to wish Sebastian that last greeting, she undoubtedly had not gone to bed. From below, in the intense stillness of the tropic night--a stillness broken only occasionally by the cry of some bird from the plantation beyond the cultivated gardens, he heard the soft luscious tones of the woman herself--and those who are familiar with the tones of southern women will recall how luscious the murmur can be; he heard, too, the deeper notes of the man. Yet what they said to each other in subdued whispers was unintelligible to him; beyond a word here and there nothing reached his ears.

With the feeling of conviction growing stronger and stronger in his mind that there was some

deception about the whole affair--that, plausible as Sebastian's possession of all which the dead man had left behind appeared; plausible, too, as was his undoubted position here and had been from his very earliest days, Julian would have given much now to overhear their conversation--a conversation which, he felt certain, in spite of it taking place thirty feet below where he was supposed to be by now asleep, related to his appearance on the scene.

Would it be possible? Could he in any way manage to thus overhear it? If he were nearer to the persianas, his ear close to the slats, his head placed down low, close to the boards of the room and of the balcony as well--what might not be overheard?

Thinking thus, he resolved to make the attempt, even while he told himself that in no other circumstances would he--a gentleman, a man of honour--resort to such a scheme of prying interference. But--for still the certainty increased in his mind that there was some deceit, some fraud in connection with Sebastian Ritherdon's possession of Desolada and all that Desolada represented in value--he did not hesitate now. As once he, with some of his bluejackets, had tracked slavers from the sea for miles inland and into the coast swamps and fever-haunted interior of the great Black Continent, so now he would track this man's devious and doubtful existence, as, remembering George Ritherdon's story, it seemed to him to be. If he had wronged Sebastian, if he had formed a false estimate of his possession of this place and of his right to the name he bore, no harm would be done. For then he would go away from Honduras for ever, leaving the man in peaceable possession of all that was rightly his. But, if his suspicions were not wrong---

He let himself down to the floor from the chair on which he had been sitting in the dark for now nearly an hour, and, quietly, noiselessly, he progressed along that solid floor--one so well laid in the past that no board either creaked or made any noise--and thus he reached the balcony, there interposing nothing now between him and it but the lowered blind.

Then when he had arrived there, he heard their voices plainly; heard every word that fell from their lips--the soft murmur of the woman's tones, the deeper, more guttural notes of the man.

Only--he might as well have been a mile away from where they sat, he might as well have been stone deaf as able to thus easily overhear those words.

For Sebastian and his companion were speaking in a tongue that was unknown to him; a tongue that, in spite of the Spanish surroundings and influences which still linger in all places forming parts of Central America, was not Spanish. Of this language he, like most sailors, knew something; therefore he was aware that it was not that, as well as he was aware that it was not French. Perhaps 'twas Maya, which he had been told in Belize was the native jargon, or Carib, which was spoken along the coast.

And almost, as he recognised how he was baffled, could he have laughed bitterly at himself. "What a fool I must have been," he thought, "to suppose that if they had any confidences to make to each other, any secrets to talk over in which I was concerned they would discuss them in a language I should be likely to understand."

But there are some words, especially those which express names, which cannot be translated into a foreign tongue. Among such, Ritherdon would be one. Julian, too, is another, with only the addition of the letter "o" at the end in Spanish (and perhaps also in Maya or Carib), and George, which, though spelt Jorge, has, in speaking, nearly the same pronunciation. And these names met his ear as did others: Inglaterra--the name of the woman Isobel Leigh, whom Julian believed to have been his mother, but whom Sebastian asserted to have been his; also the name of that fair American city lying to the north of them--New Orleans--it being referred to, of course, in the Spanish tongue.

"So," he thought to himself, "it is of me they are talking. Of me--which would not, perhaps, be strange, since a guest so suddenly received into the house and having the name of Ritherdon might well furnish food for conversation. But, when coupled with George Ritherdon, with New Orleans, above all with the name of Isobel Leigh---

Even as that name was in his mind, he heard it again mentioned below by the woman--Madame Carmaux. Mentioned, too, in conjunction with and followed by a light, subdued laugh; a laugh in which his acuteness could hear an undercurrent of bitterness--perhaps of derision.

"And she was this woman's relative," he thought, "her relative! Yet now she is jeered at, spoken scornfully of by---

In amazement he paused, even while his reflections arrived at this stage.

In front of where his eyes were, low down to the floor of the balcony, something dark and sombre passed, then returned and stopped before him, blotting from his eyes all that lay in front of them--the tops of the palms, the woods beyond the garden, the dark sea beyond that. Like a pall it rested before his vision, obscuring, blurring everything. And, a moment later, he recognised that it was a woman's dress which thus impeded his view, while, as he did so, he heard some five feet above him a light click made by one of the slats.

Then, with an upward glance of his eyes, that glance being aided by a noiseless turn of his

head, he saw that a finger was holding back the lath, and knew--felt sure--that into the darkness of the room two other eyes were gazing.

## **CHAPTER IX.**

### **BEATRIX**

Thirty-six hours later Julian Ritherdon sat among very different surroundings from those of Desolada; certainly very different ones from those of his first night in the gloomy, mysterious house owned by that other man who bore his name.

He was seated now in a wicker chair placed beneath the cool shadow cast by a vast clump of "shade-trees," as the royal palm, the thatch palm, and, indeed, almost every kind and species of that form of vegetation are denominated. These shade-trees grew in the pretty and luxuriant garden of Mr. Spranger's house on the southern outskirts of Belize, a garden in which, for some years now, Beatrix Spranger had passed the greater part of her days, and sometimes when the hot simoon was on, as it was now, and the temperature scarcely ever fell below 85°, a good deal of the early part of her nights.

She, too, was seated in that garden now, talking to Julian, while between them there lay two or three books and London magazines (three or four months old), a copy of the Times of the same ancient date, and another of the Belize Advertiser fresh from the local press. Yet neither the news from London which had long since been published, nor that of the immediate neighbourhood, which was quite new but not particularly exciting, seemed to have been able to secure much of their attention. And this for a reason which was a simple one and easily to be understood. All their attention was at the present moment concentrated on each other.

"You cannot think," Beatrix Spranger was saying now, "what a welcome event the arrival of a stranger is to us here, who regard ourselves more or less as exiles for the time being. Moreover," she continued, without any of that false shame which a young lady at home in England might have thought necessary to assume, even though she did not actually feel it, "it seems to me that you are a very interesting person, Lieutenant Ritherdon. You have dropped down into a place where your name happens to be extremely well known, yet in which no one ever imagined that there was any other Ritherdon in existence anywhere, except the late and the present owners of Desolada."

"People, even exiles, have relatives sometimes in other parts of the world," Julian murmured rather languidly--the effect of the heat and the perfume of the flowers in the garden being upon him--"and you know----"

"Oh! yes," the girl said, with an answering smile. "I do know all that. Only I happen to know something else, too. You see we--that is, father and I--are acquainted with your cousin, and we knew his father before him. And it is a rather singular thing that they have always given us to understand that, so far as they were aware, they hadn't a relation in the world."

"They had, though, you see, all the same. Indeed, they had two until a short time ago; namely, when my father, Mr. George Ritherdon, was alive."

"Mr. Ritherdon, Sebastian's father, hadn't seen him for many years, had he? He didn't often speak of him, and always gave people the idea that his brother was dead. I suppose they had not parted the best of friends?"

"No," Julian answered quietly, "I don't think they had. As a matter of fact, my--George Ritherdon--was almost, indeed quite, as reticent about his brother Charles as Charles seems to have been about him." Then, suddenly changing the subject, he said: "Is Sebastian popular hereabouts. Is he liked?"

"No," the girl replied, rather more frankly than Julian had expected, while, as she did so, she lifted a pair of beautiful blue eyes to his face. "No, I don't think he is, since you ask me."

"Why not? You may tell me candidly, Miss Spranger, especially as you know that to-night I am going to have a rather serious interview with your father, and shall ask him for his advice and assistance on a matter in which I require his counsel."

"Oh! I don't know quite," the girl said now. "Only--only--well! you know--because you have told us that you saw him doing it--he--he--is too fond of play, of gambling. People say--different things. Some that he is ruining his brother planters, and others that he is ruining himself. Then he has



the reputation of being very hard and cruel to some of his servants. You know, we have coolies and negroes and Caribs and natives here, and a good many of them are bound to the employers for a term of years--and--and--well--if one feels inclined to be cruel--they can be."

As she spoke of this, Julian recognised how he had been within an ace of discovering, some time before he reached the inn at All Pines, that the late Mr. Ritherdon had not died without leaving an heir, apparent or presumptive, as he had supposed when he landed at Belize. The negro guide on whom he had bestowed so many good-humoured sobriquets had spoken of Mr. Ritherdon as being a hard and cruel man, both to blacks and whites. But--in his ignorance, which was natural enough--he had supposed that the statement could only have applied to the one owner of Desolada of whom he had ever heard--the man lately dead.

Now, he reflected, he wished he had really understood to whom that negro referred. It might have made a difference in his plans, he thought; might have prevented him from going on farther on the road to All Pines and Desolada; from meeting this unexpected, unknown of, possessor of what he believed to be his, until those plans had become more matured. Until, too, he had had time to decide in what form, if any, he should present himself before the man who was called Sebastian Ritherdon.

However, it was done. He had presented himself and, if he knew anything of human nature, if he could read a character at all, his appearance had caused considerable excitement in the minds of both Sebastian Ritherdon and Madame Carmaux.

"Do *you* like Sebastian?" he asked now, and he could scarcely have explained why he was anxious to hear a denial of any liking for that person on the part of Beatrix Spranger. It may have been, he thought, because this girl, with her soft English beauty, which the climate of British Honduras during some years of residence had--certainly, as yet--had no power to impair, seemed to him far too precious a thing to be wasted on a man such as Sebastian was--rough, a gambler, and possessing cruel instincts.

"Do you think I should like him?" she asked in her turn, and again the eyes which he thought were so beautiful glanced at him from beneath their thick lashes, "after what I have told you of the character he bears? What I have told you, perhaps, far too candidly, saying more than I ought to have done."

"Do not think that," he made haste to exclaim. "To-night I am going to be even more frank with Mr. Spranger. I am going to tell him one or two things in connection with my 'cousin,' when I ask him for his assistance and advice, which will make your father at least imagine that I have not formed a very favourable impression of my new-found relative."

"And mayn't I be told, too--now?" she asked, thoroughly womanlike.

"Not yet," he answered, with a smile. "Not yet. Later--perhaps."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with something that might almost be described as a pout. "Oh! Not even after my candour about your cousin! You *are* a man of mystery, Lieutenant Ritherdon. Why! you won't even tell us how it happens that you arrived here from Desolada with that round your arm," and as she spoke she directed her blue eyes to a sling around his neck in which his arm reposed. "Nor that," she added, nodding now towards his forehead, where, on the left side, were affixed two or three pieces of sticking-plaster.

"Yes," he said, "I will tell you that. I feel, indeed, that I ought to do so, if only as an apology for presenting myself before you in such a guise. You see, it is so easy to explain this, that it is not worth making any mystery about it. It all comes from the fact that I am a sailor, and sailors are proverbial for being very bad riders," and as he spoke he accompanied his words with another smile.

But Beatrix did not smile in return. Instead, she said, half gravely, perhaps almost half severely: "Go on. Lieutenant Ritherdon, if you please. I wish to hear how the accident happened," while she added impressively, "on your journey from Desolada to Belize."

"I'm a bad rider," he said again, but once more meeting her glance, he altered his mode of speech and said:

"Well, you see, Miss Spranger, it happened this way. I set out on my journey of inspection, on my road to Desolada, on a rather ancient mustang which the worthy landlord of the hotel with a queer Spanish name recommended to me as the proper thing to do the journey easily on. Later, when I had made Sebastian's acquaintance, he rather ridiculed my good Rosinante."

"Did he!" Beatrix interjected calmly.

"He did, indeed. In fact he said such creatures were scarcely ever used in the colony except for draught purposes. Then he said he would mount me on a good horse of Spanish breed, such as I believe you use a great deal here; so that when I was returning to Belize yesterday to present myself before you and Mr. Spranger, I should be able to make the journey rapidly and comfortably."

"That was very kind of him," Beatrix exclaimed. "Though, as you did not arrive until nine o'clock at night, you hardly seem to have made it very rapidly, and those things," with again a glance at the sling and the plasters, "are not usually adjuncts to comfort."

"Well, you see, I'm a sailor and not a good ri----"

"Go on, please."

"Yes, certainly. I started under favourable circumstances at six in the morning, receiving, I believe, a kind of blessing or benediction from Sebastian and Madame Carmaux, as well as strong injunctions to return as soon as possible."

"People are hospitable in this country," Beatrix again interrupted.

"We got along very well, anyhow, for a time; at a gentle trot, of course, because already it was getting hot, and as we neared All Pines I was just thinking of slowing down to a walk when----"

"The creature bolted? Was that it?"

"As a matter of fact it was. By the way, you seem to know the manners and customs of the animals in this country, Miss Spranger."

"I know that many lives are lost in this country," the girl said gravely now, "owing to unbroken horses being ridden too young horses, too, that are sometimes full of vice. The landlord of the hotel here did you a better service than your cousin."

"Perhaps this was one of those horses," Julian remarked. "But, anyhow, it bolted. Then, a little later, it did something else. It stopped dead in a gallop and, after nearly shooting me over its head, it reared upright and did absolutely throw me off it backwards. Fortunately, I fell at the side of the road onto a sort of undergrowth full of ferns and interspersed with lovely flowering shrubs; so I got off with what you see. The horse, however, had killed itself. It fell over on its back with a tremendous sort of backward bound and, when I got up and looked at it, it was just dying. Later, I came on from All Pines in a kind of cart--that is, when I had been bandaged up. Perhaps, however, it wouldn't have happened if I had not been such a bad rider and----"

"It would have happened," Beatrix said, decisively, "if you had been a circus rider or a cowboy. That is, unless you had been well acquainted with the horse, and, even then, it would probably have happened just the same."

After this they were silent for a little while, Julian availing himself of Beatrix's permission to smoke, and she sitting meditatively behind her huge fan. And, although he did not tell her so, Julian agreed with her that the accident would probably have happened even though he had been a circus rider or a cowboy, as she had said.

## CHAPTER X.

### **MR. SPRANGER OBTAINS INFORMATION**

Mr. Spranger was at home later in the afternoon, his business for the day being done, and in the evening they all sat down to dinner in the now almost cool and airy dining-room of his house. And, at this meal, Julian thought that Beatrix looked even prettier than she had done in the blue-and-white striped dress worn by her during the day. She had on now one of those dinner jackets which young ladies occasionally assume when not desirous of donning the fullest of evening gowns, and, as he sat there observing the healthy sunburn of her cheeks (which was owing to her living so much in the open air) that contrasted markedly with the whiteness of her throat, he thought she was one of the most lovely girls he had ever seen. Which from him, who had met so much beauty in different parts of the world, was a very considerable compliment--if she had but known it. Also, if the truth must be told, her piquant shrewdness and vivacity--which she had manifested very considerably during Julian's description of the vagaries of the animal lent to him by his cousin--appealed very much to him, so that he could not help reflecting how, should this girl eventually be made acquainted with all the doubts and difficulties which now perplexed him as to his birthright, she might possibly become a very valuable counsellor.

"She has ideas about my worthy cousin for some reason," he thought to himself more than once during dinner, "and most certainly she suspects him of--well of not having been very careful about the mount he placed at my disposal. So do I, as a matter of fact--only perhaps it is as well not to say so just at present."

Moreover, now was not the time to take her into his confidence; the evening was required for something else, namely, the counsel and advice of her father. He had made Mr. Spranger's acquaintance overnight on his arrival, and, in the morning of the present day, before that gentleman had departed to his counting house in Belize, he had asked if he would, in the evening, allow him to have his counsel on some important reasons connected with his appearance in British Honduras. Whereon, Mr. Spranger having told him very courteously that any advice or assistance which he could give should be at his service, Julian knew that the time had arrived for him to take that gentleman into his confidence. Arrived, because now, Beatrix, rising from the table, made her way out to the lawn, where, already, a negro servant had placed a lamp on the rustic table by which she always sat; she saying that when they had done their conference they would find her there.

"Now, my boy," said Mr. Spranger, who was a hale, jovial Englishman, on whom neither climate nor exile had any depressing influence, and who, besides, was delighted to have as his guest a young man who, as well as being a gentleman, could furnish him with some news of that far-off world from which he expected to be separated for still some years. "Now, help yourself to some more claret--it is quite sound and wholesome--and let me see what I can do for you."

"It will take some time in the telling," Julian said. "It is a long story and a strange one."

"It may take till midnight, if you choose," the other answered. "We sit up late in this country, so as to profit by the coolest hours of the day."

"But--Miss Spranger. Will she not think me very rude to detain you so long?"

"No," he replied. "If we do not join her soon, she will understand that our conversation is of importance."

It was nearly midnight when Julian had concluded the whole of his narrative, he telling Mr. Spranger everything that had occurred from the time when George Ritherdon had unfolded that strange story in his Surrey home, until the hour when he himself had arrived at the house in which he now was, with his arm bandaged up and his head dressed.

Of course there had been interruptions to the flow of the narrative. Once they had gone out onto the lawn to bid Beatrix good-night and to chat with her for a few moments during which Julian had been amply apologetic for preventing her father from joining her, as well as for not doing so himself--and, naturally, Mr. Spranger had himself interrupted the course of the recital by exclamations of astonishment and with many questions.

But that recital was finished now, and still the elder man's bewilderment was extreme.

"It is the most extraordinary story I ever heard in my life! A romance. And it seems such a tangled web! How, in Heaven's name, can your father's, or uncle's, account be the right one?"

"You do not believe his story?" Julian asked; "you believe Sebastian is, in absolute fact, Charles Ritherdon's son?"

"What am I to believe? Just think! That young man has been brought up here ever since he was a baby; there must be hundreds upon hundreds of people who can recollect his birth, twenty-six years ago, his christening, his baptism. And Charles Ritherdon--whom I knew very well indeed--recognised him, treated him in every way, as his son. He died leaving him his heir. What can stand against that?"

"Doubtless it is a mystery. Yet--yet--in spite of all, I cannot believe that George Ritherdon would have invented such a falsehood. Remember, Mr. Spranger, I had known him all my life and knew every side and shade of his character. And--he was dying when he told it all to me. Would a man go to his grave fabricating, uttering such a lie as that?"

For a moment Mr. Spranger did not reply, but sat with his eyes turned up towards the ceiling of the room--and with, upon his face, that look which all have seen upon the faces of those who are thinking deeply. Then at last he said--

"Come, let us understand each other. You have asked my advice, my opinion, as the only man you can consult freely. Now, are we to talk frankly--am I to talk without giving offence?"

"That is what I want," Julian said, "what I desire. I must get to the bottom of this mystery. Heaven knows I don't wish to claim another man's property--I have no need for it--there is my profession and some little money left by George Ritherdon. On the other hand, I don't desire to think of him as dying with such a deception in his heart. I want to justify him in my eyes."

Then, because Mr. Spranger still kept silence, he said again: "Pray, pray tell me what you do think. Pray be frank. No matter what you say."

"No," Mr. Spranger said now. "No. Not yet at least. First let us look at facts. I was not in the colony twenty-six years ago, but of course, I am acquainted with scores of people who were. And

those people knew old Ritherdon as well as they know me; also they have known Sebastian all his life. And, you must remember, there are such things as registers of births, registers kept of baptism, and so forth. What would you say if you saw the register of Sebastian's birth, as well as the register of your--of Mrs. Ritherdon's death?"

"What could I say in such circumstances? Only--why, then, the attempt to make me break my neck on that horse? Why the half-caste girl watching me through the night, and why the conversation which I overheard, the contemptuous laugh of Madame Carmaux at my mother's--at Isobel Leigh's name? Why all that, coupled with the name of George Ritherdon, of myself, of New Orleans--where he said he had me baptized when he fled there after kidnapping me?"

As Julian spoke, as he mentioned the name of New Orleans, he saw a light upon Mr. Spranger's face--that look which comes upon all our faces when something strikes us and, itself, throws a light upon our minds; also he saw a slight start given by the elder man.

"What is it?" Julian asked, observing both these things. "What?"

"New Orleans," Mr. Spranger said now, musingly, contemplatively, with, about him, the manner of one endeavouring to force recollection to come to his aid. "New Orleans--and Madame Carmaux. Why do those names--the names of that city--of that woman--connect themselves together in my mind. Why?" Then suddenly he exclaimed, "I know! I have it! Madame Carmaux is a New Orleans woman."

"A New Orleans woman!" Julian repeated. "A New Orleans woman! Yet he, Sebastian, said when we met--that--that--she was a connection of Isobel Leigh; 'a relative of my late mother,' were his words. How could she have been a relative of hers, if Mr. Leigh came out from England to this place bringing with him his English wife and the child that was Isobel Leigh, as George Ritherdon told me he did? Also----"

"Also what?" Mr. Spranger asked now. "Also what? Though take time--exert your memory to the utmost. There is something strange in the discrepancy between George Ritherdon's statement made in England and Sebastian's made here. What else is it that has struck you?"

"This. As we rode towards Desolada he was telling me that he had never been farther away from Honduras than New Orleans. Then he began to say--I am sure he did--that his mother came from there, but he broke off to modify the statement for another to the effect that she had always desired to visit that city. And when I asked him if his mother came from New Orleans, he said: 'Oh, no! She was the daughter of Mr. Leigh, an English merchant at Belize.'"

"You must have misunderstood him," Mr. Spranger said; "have misunderstood the first part of his remark at any rate."

"Perhaps," Julian said quietly, "perhaps." But, nevertheless, he felt perfectly sure that he had not done so. Then suddenly he said--

"You knew Mr. Ritherdon of Desolada. Tell me, do I bear any resemblance to him?"

"Yes," Mr. Spranger answered gravely, very gravely. "So much of a resemblance that you might well be his son. As great a resemblance to him as you do in a striking manner to Sebastian. You and he might absolutely be brothers."

"Only," said Julian, "such a thing is impossible. Mrs. Ritherdon did not become the mother of twins, and she died within a day or so of giving her first child birth. She could never have borne another."

"That," Spranger acquiesced, "is beyond doubt."

They prepared to separate now for the night, yet before they did so, his host said a word to Julian. "To-morrow," he told him, "when I am in the city, I will speak to one or two people who have known all about the Desolada household ever since the place became the property of Mr. Ritherdon. And, as perhaps you do not know, twenty-five years ago all births along the coast, and far beyond Desolada, were registered in Belize. Now, they are thus registered at All Pines--but it is only in later days that such has been the case."

And next morning, when Mr. Spranger had been gone from his home some two or three hours, and Julian happened to be sitting alone in Beatrix's favourite spot in the garden--she being occupied at the moment with her household duties--a half-caste messenger from the city brought him a letter from Mr. Spranger, or, rather, a piece of paper, on which was written--

"Miriam Carmaux's maiden name was Gardelle and she came from New Orleans. She married Carmaux in despair, after, it is said, being jilted by Charles Ritherdon (who had once been in love with her). Her marriage took place about the same time as Mr. Ritherdon's with Miss Leigh, but her husband was killed by a snake bite a few months afterwards. Sebastian's birth was registered here by Mr. Ritherdon, of Desolada, as taking place on the 4th of September, 1871, he being described as the child of 'Charles Ritherdon, of Desolada, and Isobel his wife, now dead.'"

"Her death is also registered as taking place on the 7th of September, 1871."

"Sebastian's birth registered as taking place on the 4th of September, 1871!" Julian exclaimed, as the paper fell from his hand. "The 4th of September, 1871! The very day that has always been kept in England as my birthday. The very day on which I am entered in the Admiralty books as being born in Honduras!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### A VISIT OF CONDOLENCE

The remainder of that day was passed by Julian in the society of Beatrix--since Mr. Spranger never came back to his establishment--which was called "Floresta"--until he returned for good in the evening; the summer noontide heat causing a drive to and from Belize for lunch to be a journey too full of discomfort to be worth undertaking. Therefore, this young man and woman were drawn into a companionship so close that, ere long, it seemed to each of them that they had been acquainted for a considerable time, while to Beatrix it began to appear that when once Lieutenant Ritherdon should have taken his departure, the cool shady garden of her abode would prove a vastly more desolate place than it had ever done before.

But, while these somewhat dreary meditations occupied her thoughts, Julian was himself revolving in his own mind a determination to which he had almost, if not quite, arrived at as yet--a determination that she should be made a confidante of what engrossed now the greater part of his reflections, i.e., the mystery which surrounded both his own birth and that of Sebastian Ritherdon. The greater part, but not the whole of these reflections! because he soon observed that one other form--a form far different from the handsome but somewhat rough and saturnine figure and personality of his cousin Sebastian--was ever present in his mind and, if not absolutely present before his actual eyes, was never absent from his thoughts.

That form was the tall, graceful figure of Beatrix, surmounted by the shapely head and beautiful features of the girl; the head crowned by masses of fair curling hair, from beneath which those calm and clear blue eyes gazed out through the thick and somewhat darker lashes.

"I must do it," he was musing to himself now, as they sat in the shade when the light luncheon was over, and while around them were all the languorous accompaniments of a tropic summer day, with, also, the cloying, balmy odours of the tropic summer atmosphere; "I must do it, must take her into my confidence, obtain her opinion as well as her father's. She can see as far as any one, as she showed plainly enough by her manner when I told her about my ride on that confounded horse. She might in this case perhaps, see something, divine something of that which at present is hidden from her father and from me."

Yet, although he had by now arrived at the determination to impart to her all that now so agitated him, he also resolved that he would not do so until he had taken her father's opinion on the subject.

"He will not refuse, I imagine," he thought to himself. "Why should he? Especially when I represent to him that, by excluding her from the various confidences which he and I must exchange on the matter--since he has evidently thrown himself heart and soul into unravelling the mystery--we shall also be dooming her to a great many hours of dulness and lack of companionship."

But this, perhaps, savoured a little of sophistry--although probably imperceptibly so to himself--since it must be undoubted that he also recognised how great a lack of her companionship he was likewise dooming himself to if she was not allowed to participate in their conversation on the all important subject.

Young people are, however, sometimes more or less of sophists, especially those who, independently of all other concerns of importance, are experiencing a certain attractiveness that is being exercised by members of the other sex into whose companionship they are much thrown by chance.

The day drew on; above them the heat--that subtle tropical heat which has been justly compared with the atmosphere of a Turkish bath or the engine room of a steamer--was exerting its full and irresistible power on all and everything that was subject to its influence. Even the yellow-headed parrots had now ceased their chattering and clacking; while Beatrix's pet monkey,

whose home was on the lower branches of a huge thatch-palm, presented a mournful appearance of senile exhaustion, as it sat with its head bowed on its breast and its now drawn-down, wizened features a picture of absolute but resigned despair. And even those two human beings, each ordinarily so full of life and youth and vigour, appeared as if--despite all laws of good breeding to the effect that friends and acquaintances should not go to sleep in each other's presence--they were about to yield to the atmospheric influence. Julian knew that he was nodding, even while, as he glanced to where Beatrix's great fan had now ceased to sway, he was still wide awake enough to suspect that his were not the only eyes that were struggling to keep open.

As thus all things human and animal succumbed, or almost succumbed, to the dead, unruffled atmosphere, and while, too, the scarlet flowers of the flamboyants and the lilac-coloured blossoms of the oleanders drooped, across the lawn so carefully sown, with English grass seeds every spring and mowed and watered regularly, there fell a heavy footstep on the ears of Beatrix and Julian--footsteps proclaimed clearly by the jingle of spurs, if in no other way. And, a moment later, a sonorous voice was heard, expressing regret for thus disturbing so grateful a siesta and for intruding at all.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ritherdon," Julian said, somewhat coldly, as now Sebastian came close to them; while Beatrix--her face as calm as though no drowsiness had come near her since the past night--greeted him with a civility that might almost have been termed glacial, and was, undoubtedly, distant. "I suppose you have heard of my little adventure on the horse you so kindly exchanged for my mustang?"

"It is for that that I am here," the other answered, dropping into a basket-chair towards which Beatrix coldly waved her hand. "I cannot tell you what my feelings, my remorse, were on hearing what had befallen you. Good Heavens! think--just think--how I should have felt if any real, any serious accident had befallen you! Yet, it was not my fault."

"No?" asked Julian. "No? Did you not know the animal's peculiarities, then?"

"Of course. Naturally. But, owing to the carelessness of one of the stable hands, you were given the wrong one. I can tell you that that fellow has had the best welting he ever had in his life and has been sent off the estate. You won't see him there when you return to me."

"No," thought Beatrix to herself, "he won't. And what's more he never would have seen him, unless he has the power of creating imaginary people out of those who have no actual existence." While, although her lips did not move, there was in her eyes a look--conveyed by a hasty glance towards Julian, which told him as plainly as words could have done, what her thoughts were.

"We had bought a new draft of horses," Sebastian went on, "and by a mistake this one--the one on which you rode--got into the wrong stall, the stall properly belonging to the animal you ought to have had. Heavens!" he exclaimed again, "when I heard that it had been found lying dead near All Pines and that you had been attended to there--your injuries being exaggerated, I am thankful to see--I thought I should have gone mad. You, my guest, my cousin, to be treated thus."

"It doesn't matter. Only, when I come to see you, I hope your stableman will be more careful."

As he spoke of returning to Desolada once more, the other man's face lit up with a look of pleasure in the same manner that it had done on a previous occasion. Any one regarding him now would have said that there was a generous, hospitable host, to whom no greater satisfaction could be afforded than to hear that his invitations were sought after and acceptable.

He did not deceive either of his listeners, however; not Julian, who now had reason to suspect many things in connection with this man's existence and possession of Desolada; nor Beatrix who, without knowing what Julian knew, had always disliked Sebastian and, since the affair of the horse, had formed the most unfavourable opinions concerning his good faith.

Probably, however, Sebastian, who also had good reasons for doubting whether either of them was likely to believe his explanations, scarcely expected that they should be deceived. He expressed, nevertheless, the greatest, indeed the most vivid, satisfaction at Julian's words, and exclaimed, "Ah! when next you come to see me? That is it--what I desire. You shall be well treated, I can assure you--the honoured relative, and all that kind of thing. Now fix the date, Mr. Rither--cousin Julian."

The poets and balladmongers (also the lady novelists) have told us so frequently that there is no possibility of our ever forgetting it, that there exists, such a thing as the language of the eyes, while, to confirm their statements, we most of us have our own special knowledge on the subject. And that language was now being used with considerable vehemence by Beatrix as a means of conveying her thoughts to Julian, her sweet blue eyes signalling clearly to him a message which she took care should be unseen by Sebastian. A message that, if put into words, would have said: "Don't go! Don't go!" or, "Don't fix a date."

But--although Julian understood perfectly that language--it was not his cue to act upon it at the present moment. Beatrix did not know all yet, though he was determined she should do so that very night; and, also, he had already resolved that he would once more become an inmate of Desolada. There, if anywhere, he believed that some proof might be found, some circumstances discovered to throw a light upon what he believed to be a strange reversal of the proper state of

things that ought to actually exist; in short, he was determined to accept Sebastian's invitation.

Purposely avoiding Beatrix's glance, therefore, while meaning to explain his reason for doing so later on, when they should be alone, he said now to his cousin--

"You are very good, and, of course, I shall be delighted to come back and stay with you. As to the date, well! Mr. and Miss Spranger are so kind and hospitable that you must let me avail myself of their welcome for a little longer. I suppose a day need not be actually fixed just now?"

"Why, no, my dear fellow," Sebastian exclaimed, with that almost boisterous cordiality which he had unflinchingly evinced since they had first met, and which might be either real or assumed. "Why, no, of course not. Indeed, there is no need to fix any date at all. There is the house and everything in it, and there am I. Come when you like and you will find a welcome, rough as it must needs be in this country, but at any rate sincere."

After which there was nothing more for Julian to do than to mutter courteous thanks for such proffered hospitality and to promise that, ere long, he would again become a guest at Desolada.

They walked with Sebastian now to the stable, where his horse was awaiting him, Beatrix proffering refreshment--to omit which courtesy to a visitor would have been contrary to all the established, though unwritten, laws of Honduras, as well as, one may say, of most colonies--but Sebastian, refusing this, rode off to Belize, where he said he had business. And Julian could not help wondering to himself if that business could possibly have any connection with the same affairs which had brought him out from England.

"You either didn't see my signals, or misunderstood them," Beatrix said, as now they returned once more to the coolness of the garden.

"Pardon me," Julian replied, "I did. Only, it is necessary--absolutely necessary, I think--that I should pay another visit to my cousin's house. To-night your father and I are going to invite your opinion on a matter between Sebastian and me. Then I think you will also agree that it is necessary for me to return to Desolada."

"I may do so," Beatrix said, "but all the same I don't like the idea of your being an inhabitant of that place--of your being under his roof again."

## CHAPTER XII.

### **THE REMINISCENCES OF A FRENCH GENTLEMAN**

A week later Julian was once more on his way towards Desolada, and upon a journey which he was fully determined should either result in satisfying him that Sebastian did not properly occupy the position which he now held openly in the eyes of the whole colony, or should be his last one.

He did not 'come to this decision without much anxious consideration being given to the subject by himself, by Mr. Spranger, and by Beatrix--who had been taken into the confidence of the others on the evening following Sebastian's visit to "Floresta." Nor had he arrived at the decision to again become his cousin's guest without taking their opinions on that subject as well.

And the result was--when briefly stated--that he was on his road once more.

Now, as he rode along a second time on the mule (which had been returned to its owner by a servant from Desolada), because it was at least a safe and trusty animal although not speedy--such a qualification being, indeed, unnecessary, in a country where few people ride swiftly because of the heat--he was musing deeply on all that the past weeks had brought forth.

"First," he reflected, "it has done one thing which was not to be expected, and may or may not have a bearing on what I am in this place for. It has caused me to fall over head and ears in love. Some people would say, 'That's good.' Others that it is bad, since it might distract my attention from more serious matters. So it would be bad, for me, if she doesn't feel the same way. I suppose I shall have courage to tell her all about it some day, but at present I'm sure I couldn't do it. And, anyhow, we will first of all see who and what I am. As the owner of Desolada I should be a more suitable match than as a lieutenant of five years' seniority with a few thousand pounds in various colonial securities."

Whereupon, since the animal had by now reached the knoll where he had halted with his guide for luncheon upon the occasion of his former journey along the same road, he dismounted and,

drawing out of his haversack a packet of sandwiches prepared for him by Beatrix's cook, commenced, while eating them to reconsider all that had taken place during the past week.

What had taken place needs, indeed, to be set down here, since the passage of the last few days had brought to light more than one discrepancy in connection not only with Sebastian's first statements to Julian, but also with his possession of all that the late Mr. Ritherdon had left him the sole possessor of.

Mr. Spranger had brought home with him to dinner, on the night following that when Beatrix had been informed of the strange variance between the statement made by George Ritherdon in England, and the recognised position held by Sebastian in British Honduras, an elderly gentleman who filled a position in one of the principal schools established by the Government and in receipt of Government aid, in the city; while, before doing so, he had suggested to Julian that he should keep his ears open but say as little as possible. To his daughter he had also made the same suggestion, which was, as a matter of fact, unnecessary, since that young lady had now thrown herself heart and soul into the unravelling of a mystery which she said was more interesting than the plot of any novel she had read for many a long day. Also, it need scarcely be said to which side her opinions inclined, or in which quarter her sympathies were enlisted. Julian had wondered later, as he ate his lunch on the knoll, whether the affection which had sprung up in his heart for this girl was ever likely to be returned; but, had he been able to peer closely into that mystical receptacle of conglomerate feelings--a woman's heart--his wonderment might, perhaps, have ceased to exist.

With considerable skill, Mr. Spranger led the conversation at dinner to the old residents in the colony and, at last, by more or less devious ways, to the various personages who at one time or another had been inhabitants of Desolada. Then, when he and his guest were, to use a hunting metaphor, in full cry over a fine open country, he casually remarked that, among others, Madame Carmaux had herself held a considerable place of trust in the establishment for a great many years.

"Yes, yes," said the old gentleman, who was himself a French-American from Florida, "yes, a long time. Miriam Carmaux! Ha! Miriam Carmaux--Miriam Gardelle as she was when she arrived here from New Orleans and sought a place as governess. A beautiful girl then; oh! my faith, she was beautiful."

"Did she get a place as governess?" Mr. Spranger asked, filling Monsieur Lemaire's glass.

"Well, you see, she did and she did not. She got lessons in families, but no posts, no. No posts. Then, of course, she married poor Carmaux. Oh! these snakes--ah! *mon Dieu*, that coral-snake, and the tommy-goff--there are dreadful creatures for you! It was a tommy-goff that killed poor Jules Carmaux."

"Was it, though? And what was poor Carmaux?"

"Ah!" said Monsieur Lemaire, shaking his head most mournfully, "he was not a solid man, not steady. Oh! no, not at all steady. Carmaux loved pleasure too much: all kinds of pleasure. He loved cards, and--and--excuse me, Miss Spranger--but he loved this also," while as he spoke the old gentleman shook his head reprovingly at the claret jugs. "Also he loved sport--shooting the curassow, hunting the raccoon and the jaguar--ah! he did not love work. Oh, no! Work and he were never the best of friends. Then the tommy-goff killed him in the woods."

"Perhaps," remarked Beatrix with one of her bright smiles, "as a punishment for his not loving work."

"But," said Mr. Spranger, "he must have been a poor husband for that young lady, Mademoiselle Gardelle, as she was then. If he would not work, how did he support a wife?"

"Ah!" said Monsieur Lemaire with a very emphatic shake of his head now, so that Beatrix wondered he did not get quite warm over the exertion, "Ah! they did say that he thought she might earn the money to support him." And still he wagged his head.

"I wonder," exclaimed Julian, who had been listening to all this with considerable interest, "that she should have married him. He seems to have been a useless sort of man."

"Ah! Ah! There were reasons, very sad reasons. You see, she had been in love with another man. Ah! *mon Dieu*, these love affairs. Another man, Mr. Ritherdon, was supposed to have been the object of her affections."

"Dear! dear," said Mr. Spranger.

"Yes. Only--" and now Monsieur Lemaire made a sort of apologetic, old-court-life-in-France style of bow to Beatrix, as though beseeching pardon for the errors of his own sex--sinking his voice, too, to a kind of pleading one, as well as one reprobating the late Mr. Ritherdon's conduct--"only he jilted her."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the girl, feeling it necessary to say something in return for the old Frenchman's politeness, while, as a matter of fact, she had heard the story from her father only a



night or so before. "Good gracious!"

"Ah! yes. Ah! yes," Lemaire continued. "It was so indeed. Indeed it was. Then, they do say----" And now he sank his voice so much that he might have been reciting the history of some most awful and soul-stirring Greek tragedy, "they do say that in her rage and despair she flung herself away on Carmaux. But the tommy-goff killed him after he trod on it in the woods--and, so, she was free." Then his voice rose crescendo, as though the mention of the tragedy being concluded, a lighter tone was permissible.

"Take some more claret," said Mr. Spranger; "help yourself." While as the old gentleman did so, he continued--

"But how in such circumstances did she become a resident in Mr. Ritherdon's house? One would have thought that was the last place she would be found in next."

"Ah!" said Monsieur Lemaire, "then the woman's heart, the heart of all good women"--and he bowed solemnly now to Beatrix--"exerted its sway. She was bereft, even the little girl, the poor little daughter that had been born to her after Carmaux's death--when the tommy-goff killed him--was dead and buried----"

"So she had had a daughter?" said Mr. Spranger.

"Poor woman, yes. But what--what was I saying. The good woman's heart prompted her, and, smothering her own griefs, forgetting her own wrongs, knowing the stupendous misery which had fallen on the man who had jilted her through the loss of his wife, she went to him and offered to look after the poor little motherless Sebastian; to be a guide and nurse to it. Ah! a noble woman was Miriam Carmaux, a woman who buried her own griefs in assuaging those of others."

"She went to Desolada," Julian said, "after Mrs. Ritherdon's death? She did that? After Mrs. Ritherdon's death?"

"*Si*. After her death. Soon. Very soon. As soon as her own sorrows, her own loss, were more or less softened."

That night, when Monsieur Lemaire had been driven back into the city in Mr. Spranger's buggy, the latter gentleman, his daughter and Julian, sat out on the lawn, inhaling the cool breeze which comes up from the sea at sunset as well as watching the fireflies dancing. All were quite silent now, for all were occupied with their own thoughts: Julian in reflecting on what Monsieur Lemaire had said; Beatrix in wondering whether George Ritherdon's dying disclosures could possibly have been true; Mr. Spranger in feeling positive that they were false. Everything, he told himself, or almost everything, pointed to such being the case. The registration of Sebastian's birth by the late Mr. Ritherdon; the acknowledgment of the young man during all the dead man's remaining years as his heir: the knowledge which countless people possessed in the colony of Sebastian's whole life having been passed at Desolada! And against this, what set-off was there?

Only the falsehood--for such it must have been--told by Sebastian to the effect that Miriam Carmaux was his mother's relative, which, since she was a French creole, was impossible. Nothing much more than that; nothing tangible.

As for the slip made by him to Julian, the words, "My mother ca--I mean my mother always wanted to go there and see it," (New Orleans being the place referred to) well, there was nothing in that. It was a slip any one might easily have made. And no living soul in British Honduras had ever heard a whisper of any stolen child. Surely that was enough to settle all doubt.

Then, breaking in upon the silence around, he and his daughter heard Julian saying: "If Monsieur Lemaire's facts are accurate, Sebastian made another misstatement to me. He said that Madame Carmaux had been at Desolada for many years, *even before his mother died*. That could not have been so."

"And," said Beatrix, emerging now from the silence which she had preserved so long, "it was perhaps with reference to that subject that he had uttered the words which you overheard, to the effect that you must know something, but that knowledge was not always proof."

"All the same," said Mr. Spranger now, "it is a blank wall, a wall against which you will push in vain, I fear. Honestly, I see no outlet."

"Nor I," answered Julian, "yet all the same I mean to try and find one. At present I am groping in the dark; perhaps the light will come some day."

"I cannot believe it," Mr. Spranger said, "much as I might like to do so. If--if Charles Ritherdon's child had been stolen from its father's house how could it be that, in so small a place as this, the thing would never have been heard of? And if it was stolen, if you were stolen, how could another, a substitute, take your place?"

"Heaven only knows," Julian replied. "It is to find out this that I am going back to Desolada," while as he spoke, he saw again on Beatrix's face the look of dissent to that proposed journey

which, a day or two before, she had signalled to him through her eyes.

So--determinate, resolved to fathom the mystery, if mystery there were; refusing, too, to believe that George Ritherdon's story could have been one huge fabrication, one hideous falsehood from beginning to end, and that a fabrication, a falsehood, which must ere long be disproved, directly it was challenged--he did set out and was by now drawing near the end of his journey.

"Only," said Beatrix to him on the morning of his departure, "I do so wish you would let me persuade you not to go. I dread----"

"What?"

"Oh!" she said, raising her hands to her hair with a bewildered movement--a movement that perhaps expressed regret as to the destination for which he was about to depart. "I do not know. Yet--still--I fear. Sebastian Ritherdon is cruel;--fierce--if--if--he thought you were about to cross his path--if--he knows anything that you do not know, then I dread what the end may be. And, I shall think always of that half-caste girl--peering in--glaring into your room, with perhaps, if she is a creature, a tool of his, murder in her heart."

"Fear nothing, I beseech you," he said deeply moved at her sympathy. "I can be very firm--very resolute--when occasion needs. Fear nothing."

### **CHAPTER XIII.**

#### **A CHANGE OF APARTMENTS**

A boisterous welcome from Sebastian, a cordial grasp of the hand, accompanied by a smile from the dark eyes of Madame Carmaux (which latter would have appeared more sincere to Julian had the corners of the mouth been less drawn down and the eyelids closed a little less, while the eyes behind those lids glittering with a light that seemed to him unnatural), did not, to use a metaphor, throw any dust in his own eyes.

For long reflection on everything that had occurred since first George Ritherdon had made his statement in the Surrey home until now, when Julian stood once more in the house in which he believed himself to have been born, had only served to produce in his mind one conviction--the firm conviction that George Ritherdon was his uncle and had spoken the truth; that Sebastian was--in spite of all evidence seeming to point in a totally different direction--occupying a position which was not rightly his. A belief that, before long, he was resolved at all hazards to himself to justify and disprove once and for all.

The hilarious welcome on the part of Sebastian did not deceive him, therefore; the greeting of Madame Carmaux was, he felt, insincere. And feeling thus he knew that in the latter was one against whom he would have to be doubly on his guard.

And on his guard, against both the man and the woman, he commenced to be from the moment when he once more entered the precincts of Desolada.

That night at dinner, which was here called supper, but which only varied from the former meal in name, he observed a most palpable desire on the part of both his hosts to extract from him all that he had done while staying with the Sprangers--as well as an even stronger desire to discover into what society he might have been introduced, or what acquaintances he might happen to have made.

"I made one acquaintance," he replied to Madame Carmaux, who was by far the most pertinacious in her inquiries, "the hearing about whom may interest you considerably. A gentleman who knew you long ago."

"Indeed!" she said, "and who might that be?"

She asked the question lightly, almost indifferently, yet--unless the flicker of the lamp in the middle of the table was playing tricks with his vision--there came suddenly a look of nervousness, of apprehension, upon her face. A look controlled yet not altogether to be subdued.

"It was Monsieur Lemaire," he replied, "the professor of modern languages at the Victoria College. He said he knew you very well once, before your marriage."

"Yes," she replied, "he did," and now he saw that, whatever nervousness she might be experiencing, she was exerting a strong power of suppression of any visible outward sign of her feelings. "Monsieur Lemaire was very good to me. He enabled me to find employment as a teacher in various houses. What did he tell you besides?"

"He mentioned the sad ending to your marriage. Also the death of your little--- Excuse me," he broke off, "but you have upset your glass. Allow me," and from where he sat he bent forward, and with his napkin sopped up the spilt water which had been in that glass.

"It was very clumsy," she muttered. "My loose sleeves are always knocking things over. Thank you. But what was it you said he mentioned? The death of my---"

"Little daughter," Julian replied softly, feeling sorry--and indeed, annoyed with himself--at what he now considered a lack of delicacy and consideration. A lack of feeling, because he thought it very possible that, even after a long lapse of time, this poor widowed woman might still lament bitterly the death of her little child.

"Ah! yes," she said, though why now her face should brighten considerably he did not understand. "Ah! yes. Poor little thing, it did not live long, only a very little while. Poor little baby!"

Looking still under the lamp and feeling still a little disconcerted at the reflection that he had quite unintentionally recalled unhappy recollections to Madame Carmaux, he saw that Sebastian was also regarding her with a strange, almost bewildered look in his eyes. What that look meant, Julian was not sufficiently a judge of expression to fathom; yet, had he been compelled there and then to describe what feeling that glance most suggested to him, he would probably have termed it one of surprise.

Surprise, perhaps, that Madame Carmaux should have been so emotional as to exhibit such tenderness at the recollection being brought to her mind of her little infant daughter, dead twenty-five years ago and almost at the hour of its birth.

No more was said, however, on the subject and an adjournment was made directly the meal was over to the veranda, that place on which in British Honduras almost all people pass the hours of the evening; none staying indoors more than is absolutely necessary. And here their conversation became of the most ordinary kind for some time, its commonplace nature only being varied occasionally by divers questions put to Julian by both Sebastian and Madame Carmaux as to what George Ritherdon's existence had been since he quitted Honduras to return to England.

"It was a quiet enough one," replied Julian, carefully weighing every word he uttered and forcing himself to be on his guard over every sentence. "Quiet enough. He took to England some capital from this part of the world, as I have always understood, and he was enabled to make a sufficient living by the use of it to provide for us both. He was never rich, yet since his desires were not inordinate, we did well enough. At any rate, he was able to place me in the only calling I was particularly desirous of following, without depriving himself of anything."

"And he left money behind?" Madame Carmaux asked, while, even as she did so, Julian could not but observe that her manner was listless and absent, as well as to perceive that she only threw in a remark now and again with a view of appearing to be interested in the conversation.

"Yes," he replied, "he left money behind him. Not much; some few thousand pounds fairly well invested. Enough, anyhow, for a sailor who, at the worst, can live on his pay."

"All the same," Sebastian said, "a few thousand pounds is a mighty good thing to have handy. I wish I had a few."

"You!" exclaimed Julian, looking at him in surprise. "Why! I should have thought you had any amount. This is a big property, even for the colonies, and Mr. Ritherdon--your father--has left the reputation behind him in Belize of being one of the richest planters in the place."

"Ay," said Sebastian, "rich in produce, stores, cattle, and so forth, but no money. No ready money. Not sufficient to work a large place like this. Why, look here, Julian, as a matter of fact, you and I are each other's heirs, yet I expect I'd sooner come in for your few thousands than you would for Desolada. One can do a lot with a few thousands. I wish I had some."

"Didn't your father leave any ready money, then?" Julian asked.

"Oh, yes! He did. But it's all sunk in the place already."

Such a conversation as this would, in ordinary circumstances, have been one of no importance and certainly not worth recording, had it not--short as it was--furnished Julian with some further food for reflections. And among other shapes which those reflections took, one was that he did not believe that all the money which Mr. Ritherdon was stated to have died possessed of had been sunk in the estate. He, the late Mr. Ritherdon, had been able to put by money out of the products of that estate--it scarcely stood to reason, therefore, that his successor would have instantly invested all that money in it. Wherefore Julian at once came to the conclusion that if it was really gone--vanished--it had done so in Sebastian's gambling transactions.

Then, as to their being each other's heirs! Well, that view had never occurred to him--certainly it had never occurred to him that by any chance Sebastian could be his heir. Yet, if Sebastian was in truth Charles Ritherdon's son and he, Julian, was absolutely George Ritherdon's son, such was the case. And, if anything should happen to him while staying here at Desolada, where he had announced himself plainly as the son of George Ritherdon, he could scarcely doubt that Sebastian would put in a claim as that heir. If anything should happen to him!

Well! it might! One could never tell. It might! Especially as, when Sebastian had uttered those words, he had seen a flash from Madame Carmaux's eyes and had observed a light spring into them which told plainly enough that she had never regarded matters in that aspect before; that this new view of the state of things had startled her.

If anything should happen to him! Well, to prevent anything doing so he must be doubly careful of himself. That was all.

The evening--like most evenings spent in the tropics and away from the garish amusements and gaieties of tropical towns--was passed more or less monotonously, it being got through by scraps of conversation, by two or three cooling drinks being partaken of by Julian and Sebastian, and by Madame Carmaux in falling asleep in her chair. Though, Julian thought, her slumbers could neither have been very sound nor refreshing, seeing that, whenever he chanced to turn his eyes towards her, he observed how hers were open and fixed on him, though shut immediately that she perceived he had noticed that they were unclosed.

"Come," exclaimed Sebastian now, springing from out of his chair with as much alacrity as is ever testified in the tropics, while as he did so Madame Carmaux became wide-awake in the most perfect manner. "Come, this won't do. Early to bed you know--and all the rest of it. We practise that good old motto here."

"I thought you practised stopping up rather late when I was here last," Julian remarked quietly. "As I told you, I heard your voices and saw you sitting in the balcony long after I had turned in."

"But to-night we must be off to bed early," Sebastian replied. "I have to start for Belize to-morrow in good time, as I remarked to you at supper, and you are going to take a gun and try for some shooting in the Cockscomb mountains. Early to bed, my boy, early, and, also, an early breakfast."

After which Julian and Madame Carmaux made their adieux to each other for the night, while Sebastian, as he had done before, escorted his cousin up the vast stairs to his room. This room was, however, a different one from that occupied previously by Julian, it being on the other side of the house and looking towards those Cockscomb mountains which, gun in hand, he was to explore on the morrow.

"It is a better room," said Sebastian, "than the other, as you see; although not so large. And the sun will not bother you here in the morning, nor will our chatter on the balcony beneath or inside the room do so either. Good night, sleep well. To-morrow, breakfast at six."

"Good-night," replied Julian as he entered the room, and, after Sebastian was out of earshot (as he calculated), turned the key in the lock. Then, as he sat himself down in his chair, after again producing his revolver and placing it by his side, he thought to himself:

"Yes! he spoke truly. Their conversation below will not disturb me, nor will there be any chance of my overhearing it. All right, Sebastian, you understand the old proverb about one for me and two for yourself. But you have for gotten a little fact, namely, that a sailor can move about almost as lightly as a cat when he chooses, and, if I think you and your respected housekeeper have anything to say that it will be worth my while to hear--why, I shall be a cat for the time being."

#### **CHAPTER XIV.**

**"THIS LAND IS FULL OF SNAKES."**

The truth was, as the reader is by now very well aware, that Julian no more believed in either Sebastian's lawful possession of Desolada or in his being the son of Charles Ritherdon, than he believed that George Ritherdon had concocted the whole of that story which he narrated ere his death. "For," said the young man to himself, "if it were true, his manner and her manner--that of the superb Madame Carmaux--would not be what they are. 'Think it out,' our old naval instructor

in the Brit, used to say, 'analyze, compare, exercise the few brains Heaven has mercifully given you.' Well, I will--or, rather, I have."

And he had done so. He had thought it all over and over again--Sebastian's manner, Madame Carmaux's manner, Sebastian's slight inaccuracies of statement, Madame Carmaux's pretence of being asleep when she was awake, and her strange side-glances at him when she thought he was not observing her.

"I played *Hamlet* once at an amateur show in the Leviathan," he mused. "It was an awful performance, and, if it had been for more than one act, I should undoubtedly have been hissed out of the ship. All the same it taught me something. What was it the poor chap said? 'I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pounds.' Well, I'll take my uncle's word--for uncle he was and he was telling the truth--for a thousand pounds, too. Only, how to prove it? That is the question--which, by-the-bye, Hamlet also remarked."

That was indeed the question. How to prove it!

"That fellow is no more Charles Ritherdon's son than I'm a soldier," he went on, "and I *am* the son. That I'm sure of! Everything, every fresh look on their faces, every word they say, convinces me only the more certainly. Even this shifting of the room I am to occupy: why, Lord bless me! does he think I'm a fool? Yet, all the same, I don't see how it is to be proved. Confound them! Some one played a trick on Charles Ritherdon after George had stolen me--for steal me he did--some trick or other. And she, this Madame Carmaux was in it. Only why--why--*why?*"

He clenched his hands in front of his forehead, as he recalled now Mr. Spranger's words: "It is a blank wall against which you will push in vain." Almost, indeed, he began to fear that such was the case; that never would he throw down that wall which rose an adamantine object between him and his belief. Yet, even as he did so, he recollected that he was an Englishman and a sailor; that, consequently, he must be resolved not to be beaten. Only, how was it to be accomplished; how was the defeat to be avoided?

As he arrived at this determination he heard, outside on the veranda, a sound which he had heard more than once on his first visit, and when he slept on the other side of the mansion. A sound, light, stealthy--such a one as if some soft-footed creature, a cat, perhaps, was creeping gently in the night along the balcony. Creeping nearer to his window in front of which, as had been the case before, the Venetian blind was lowered.

Then he resolved that, this time, his strange visitant should know that he had discovered the spying to which he was again to be subjected.

In a moment he feigned sleep as he sat by the table on which stood the lamp--casting out a considerable volume of light--while, as he did so, he let his outstretched hands and fingers cover the revolver.

And still the weird, soft scraping of those catlike feet came nearer; he knew that his ghost-like visitor was close to the open window. He heard also, though it was the faintest click in the world, the slat or lath turning the least little bit, he knew that now those eyes that had gleamed into the other and darkened room were gleaming in at him in this one.

Then, suddenly, he opened his own eyes as wide as he could, while with his outstretched hand he now raised the revolver and pointed it at the little dusky figure that he could see was holding the slat back, while he said in a voice, low but perfectly clear in the silence of the night:

"Don't move. Stop where you are--there--outside that blind till I come to you. If you do move I will scatter your brains on the floor of the veranda!"

And as he rose and went towards the persianas he could see that his instructions were--through fear--obeyed. The eyes, now white, horrible, almost chalky in their glare of fright, instead of being dusky as he had once seen them, stared with a hideous expression of terror into the room. Also, the brown finger which was crooked over the blind-slat trembled.

He pulled the persianas up with his left hand, still keeping his right hand extended with the revolver in it (of course only with the intention of frightening the girl into making no attempt to fly); then, when he had fastened the pulley he took her unceremoniously by the upper part of the arm and led her into the room.

"Now, Mademoiselle Zara, as I understand your name to be, kindly give me an explanation of why, whenever I am in my room in this house, you honour me with these attentions. My manly beauty can be observed at any time in the daylight much better than at night, and----"

"Don't tell him," the girl whispered, and he felt as he still held her arm that she was trembling, while, also, he saw that she was deathly pale, her usual coffee-and-milk complexion being more of the latter than the former now. "Oh, don't tell him!"

"Don't tell whom?" he asked astonished. Astonished at first, since he had deemed her an emissary of his host, sent to pry in on him for some reason best known to both of them. Then, he reflected, this was only some ruse hatched in her scheming, half-Indian brain, whereby to escape

from his clutches; upon which he said:

"Now, look here. No lies. What do you come peeping and prying in on me for in the middle of the night. Perhaps you're not aware that I saw you do so the last time I was here."

"I came to see," she said inconsequently, "if you were comfortable; I am a servant----"

But now Julian laughed so loudly at this ridiculous statement that the girl in hasty terror--and if it was assumed, she must be a good actress, he thought--put up her hand as though she intended to clap it over his mouth.

"Oh!" she whispered, "don't! Don't! He will hear you--or *she* will----"

"Well, what if they do! I suppose they know you are here just as much as I do. Come," he continued, "come, don't look so frightened, I'm not going to shoot you or harm you in any way. Though, mind you, my dark beauty, you might have got shot if you had timed your visit at a later hour and startled me out of a heavy slumber, or if I had seen those eyes looking in on me in the dead of night. However, out with the explanation. Quick."

For a moment the girl paused as though thinking deeply, then she looked up at him with all the deep tropical glow once more in her sombre eyes, and said:

"I won't tell you. No. But----"

"But what?"

"I--will you believe what I say?"

"Perhaps. That depends. I might, if it sounded likely."

"Listen, then. I don't come here to do you any harm. My visits won't hurt you. Only--only--this is a dangerous house in more ways than one. It is a very old one--strange things happen sometimes in it. How," she said, and now her voice which had been sunk to a whisper became even lower, "how would you like to die in it?"

Perhaps the slow mysterious tones of that voice--the something weird and wizard in the elf-like appearance of this dusky girl who was, in truth, beautiful with that beauty often found in the half-caste Indian--was what caused Julian to feel a sort of creepiness to come over him in spite of the warm, bath-like temperature of the night.

"Neither in this house nor elsewhere, just at present," he remarked, steadying his nerves. "But," he continued, "I don't suppose there is much likelihood of that. Who is going to cause me to die?"

For answer the girl cast those marvellous orbs of hers all around the room, taking, meanwhile, as she did so, the mosquito curtains in her hands and shaking them with a swish away from the floor on which they drooped in festoons; she looking also behind the bedposts and in other places.

"No one--to-night," she said, "but--but--if I may not come here again, if you will not let me, then do this always. And--perhaps--some night you will know."

After which she moved off towards the window, her lithe, graceful figure seeming to glide without the assistance of any movement from her feet towards the open space; and made as though she meant to retire. Yet, as she stood within the framework of that window, she turned and looked back at him, her finger slightly raised as though impressing silence.

Then she stepped outside on to the boards of the veranda and peered over the front of it down towards the garden from which, now, there rose the countless perfumes exhaled by the Caribbean wealth of flowers. Also, she crept along to either side of the window, glancing to right and left of her until, at that moment, borne on the soft night breeze, there came from the front of the house, a harsh, strident, and contemptuous laugh--the laugh of Sebastian Ritherdon. When, seemingly reassured by this, she returned again towards the open window and said:

"You go to-morrow to the Cockscomb mountains shooting. Yet, when there, be careful. Danger is there, too. This land is full of snakes, the coral snake--which kills instantly, even like the *fer de lance* of the islands, the rattlesnake, the tamagusa, or, as you English say, the 'tommy-goff.' One killed him--her husband," and she pointed down to where Madame Carmaux might be supposed to be sitting at this moment, while as she did so he saw in her eyes a look so startling--since they blazed with fire--that he stared amazed. Was she, this half-savage girl, gloating over the horrid death of a man which must have taken place ere she was born? Or--or--what?

"In all the land," she went on, "there are snakes. Those I tell you of--and--others. You understand? And others."

"I almost understand," Julian muttered hoarsely--though he knew not why. "*And others*. Is that--? ah! yes--I do understand. Yet tell me further, tell----"

But she was gone; the window frame was empty of the dark shadowy figure it had enshrouded. Gone, as he saw when he stepped out on to the balcony and observed a sombre form stealing along betwixt the bright gleams of the low-lying stars and himself.

"Why does she warn me thus," he muttered to himself as now he began to undress slowly, "why? She is that man's servant--almost, as servants go here, his slave. Why warn me--she whom I deemed his creature--she who does his dirty work as croupier at a gambling hell? And she gloated over Carmaux's death in days of long ago--why that also? Does she hate this woman who governs here as mistress of the house?"

With some degree of horror on him now, with some sort of mystic terror creeping over him at unknown and spectrelike dangers that might be surrounding his existence, he turned down the light serape stretched over the bed for coverlet, and threw back the upper sheet. Then he started away with a hoarse exclamation at what he saw.

For, lying coiled up in the middle of the bed, yet with a hideous flat head raised and vibrating, while from out that head gleamed a pair of threatening and scintillating emerald eyes, was a small, red coral-coloured snake--a snake that next unwound itself slowly with horribly lithe and sinuous movements which caused Julian to turn cold, warm as the night was.

"So," he whispered to himself, as now he seized a rifle that he had brought out from England with him, and, after beating the reptile on to the floor, used the stock as a bat and sent the thing flying out of the window; "this is what she was looking for, what she expected to find. But where are the others? The other snakes she hinted at? I think I can guess."

## **CHAPTER XV.**

### **RECOLLECTIONS OF SEBASTIAN'S BIRTH**

It is forty miles inland to where the Cockscomb mountains rear their appropriately named crests, but not half that distance to where obliquely from north to south there run spurs and ridges which, though they do not rise to the four thousand feet that is attained by the highest peak or summit of the range, are still lofty mountains. Here, amidst these spurs and ridges, which dominate and break up what is otherwise a country, or lowland, almost as flat as Holland (and which until a few years ago was marked on the maps as "unexplored country"), Nature presents a different aspect from elsewhere in the colony. The country becomes wild and rugged; the copses of mangroves are superseded by woods and forests of prickly bamboos and umbrageous figs; vast clumps of palms of all denominations cluster together, forming in their turn other little woods, while rivers, whose sources are drawn from the great lagoons inland, roll swiftly towards the sea.

Here, upon the bank of one of those lagoons, Julian sat next day beneath the shadow of a clump of locust-trees, in which were intermingled other trees of salm-wood, braziletto, and turtle-bone, as well as many others almost unknown of and unheard of by Europeans, with at his feet a fowling-piece, while held across his knees was a safety repeating rifle. This was the rifle with which he had overnight beaten out on to the veranda (where this morning he had left it dead and crushed) the coral snake, and which he had provided himself with ere he left England in case opportunities for sport should arise. The gun, an old-fashioned thing lent him by Sebastian, he had not used against any of the feathered inhabitants of the woods, although many opportunities had arisen of shooting partridges, wild pigeons, whistling ducks, quails, and others. Had not used it because, remembering one or two other incidents, such as that of the horse and that of the coral-snake (which might have crept into his bed for extra warmth, as such reptiles will do even in the hottest climates, but on the other hand might have reached that spot by different means), and because since also he was now full of undefined suspicion, he thought it very likely that if used it would burst in his hands.

He was not alone, as by his side, there sat now a man whose features, as well as his spare, supple frame, bespoke him one of that tribe of half-breeds, namely, Spanish and Carib Indian, which furnishes so large a proportion of the labourers to the whole of Central America. He was an elderly man, this--a man nearer sixty than fifty, with snow-white hair; yet any one who should have regarded him from behind, or watched his easy strides from a distance, or his method of mounting an incline, might well have been excused for considering him to be about thirty-five.

"What did Mr. Ritherdon strike you for this morning?" Julian asked now, while, as he spoke he raised his rifle off his knee, and, with it ready to be brought to the shoulder, sat watching a number of ripples which appeared a hundred and fifty yards away in the lagoon.

"Because he is a cruel man," his companion, who was at the present time his guide, replied; "because, too, everything makes him angry now--even so small a thing as my having buckled his saddle-girth too loose. A cruel man and getting worse. Always angry now."

"Why?" asked Julian, raising the rifle and aiming it at this moment towards a conical grey-looking object that appeared above the ripples on the lagoon--an object that was, in absolute fact, the snout of an alligator.

"Because--don't fire yet, señor; he's coming nearer--because, oh! because things go very bad with him, they say. He lose much money and--and--pretty Missy Sprangy don't love him."

"Does he love her?"

"They say. Say, too, Massa Sprangy much money. Sebastiano wants money as well as pretty missy. Never get it, though. Perhaps, too, he not live get much more."

"What do you mean?" asked Julian, lowering the rifle as the huge reptile in the lagoon now drew its head under water; while he looked also at the man with stern, inquiring eyes. "What do you mean?" Though inwardly he said to himself: "This is a new phase in these mysterious surroundings. My life doesn't seem just now one that the insurance companies would be very glad to get hold of, while also my beloved cousin's doesn't appear to be a very good one. Lively place, this!"

"He very much hated," the half-breed answered. "Very cruel. Some day tommy-goffy give him a nice bite, or half-breed gentleman put a knife in his liver."

"The snakes don't hate him, do they? He can't be cruel to them."

The other gave a laugh at this; it was indeed a laugh which was something between the bleating of a sheep and the (so-called) terrible war-whoop of a North-American Indian; then he replied: "Easy enough make tommy-goffy hate him. Take tommy into room where a man sleeps, wrapped up in a serape with his head out, then put him mouth to man's arm. Tommy do the rest. Gentleman want no breakfast."

"This *is* a nice country!" Julian thought. "I'm blessed if some of these chaps couldn't give the natives in India, or the dear old Chinese, a tip or two."

While as he so reflected, he also thought: "Easy enough, too, to put tommy-goff into a man's bed. Then that man wouldn't want any breakfast either. It's rather a good job that I found myself with an appetite this morning."

"Here he comes," the man, whose name was Paz, exclaimed, now suddenly referring to the alligator. "Hit him in the eye if you can, señor, or mouth. If he gets on shore we shall have to run." While, as he spoke, from out of the lagoon there rose the head of an enormous alligator, which seemed to have touched bottom since it was waddling ashore.

"I shall never hit him in the eye," Julian said, taking deliberate aim, however. "Gather up the traps, Paz, and get further away. I'll have a shot at him; and, then if he comes on land, I'll have another. Here goes."

But now, even as he prepared to fire, the beast gave him a chance, since, either from wishing to draw breath or from excitement at seeing a probable meal, it suddenly began opening and shutting its vast jaws as it came along, so that the hideous rows of yellow teeth, and the whity-pink roof of its mouth were plainly visible. And, at that moment, from the repeating rifle rang out a report, while, after the smoke had drifted away, it was easy to perceive that the monster had received a deadly wound. It was now spread-eagled out upon the rim of the lagoon's bank, its short, squat legs endeavouring to grip the sand, its eyes rolled up in its head and a stream of blood pouring from its open mouth.

"Though," said Julian, as now he approached close to the creature, and, taking steady aim, delivered another bullet into its eye which instantly gave it the *coup de grace*; "though I don't know why I should have killed the poor beast either. It couldn't have done me any harm." Then he thought, "I might as well have reserved the fire for something that threatened danger to me."

He had had enough sport for the day by now, having done that which every visitor to Central America is told he ought to do, namely, kill a jaguar and an alligator; wherefore, bidding Paz go on with the skinning of the former (which the man had already begun earlier) since the spotted coat of this creature is worth preserving, he took a last look at the dead reptile lying half in and half out of the lagoon, and then made preparations for their return to Desolada. These preparations consisted of readjusting the saddle on the mustang, which he was still the temporary proprietor of, and in also saddling Paz's mule for him.

Then, when the operation of skinning was finished, they took their way back towards the coast.

Among other questions which Julian had asked this man during the morning with reference to the owner of the above abode, was one as to how long he had been present on the estate--a



question which had remained unanswered owing to the killing of the jaguar having occurred ere it could be answered. But now--now that they were riding easily forward, the skin of the creature hanging like a horse-cloth over the tail of the half-breed's mule, he returned to it.

"How long did you say you had known Mr. Ritherdon and his household?" he asked, referring of course to the late owner of the property to the borders of which they were now approaching.

"Didn't say anything," Paz replied, "because then we killed him," and he touched the fast drying skin of the dead animal. "But I know Desolada for over thirty years. Before Massa Ritherdon come."

"Then you've known the present Mr. Ritherdon all his life--since the day he was born."

"Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. Since that day. Always remember that. Same day my poor old mother die. She Carib from Tortola."

"Did you know his--mother--too; the lady who had been Miss Leigh?"

"Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. I know her. I remember she beautiful young girl--English missy. With the blue eye and the skin like the peach and the hair like the wheat. Oh, yes. I remember her. Very beautiful."

"Blue eyes, skin like a peach, hair like the wheat," thought Julian to himself; "his supposed mother, my own mother as before Heaven I believe. Yet he, Sebastian, speaks of this woman Carmaux, this woman of French origin hailing from New Orleans, as a near relative of hers. Bah! it is impossible."

"Also I remember," Paz went on, "when--when--his brother--the man who Sebastian tell us the other day was your father--love her too. And she love him. Only old man Leigh he say that no good. Old man ruin very much. They say constabulary and old man English Chief Justice very likely to arrest him. Then Missy Leigh save her father and marry Massa Ritherdon when Massa George's back turned."

Julian nodded as he heard all this--nodded as though confirming Paz's story. Though, in fact, it was Paz's story which confirmed that which the dead man in England had told him.

"You knew her and her father, Mr. Leigh?" he asked now.

"Know him! Know him! I worked for him at the Essex hacienda----"

"Essex hacienda!"

"Yes, he gave it that name because he love it. 'All my family, Paz,' he say to me one day when I was painting the name on waggon--'all my family come from Essex many, many long years. All born there--grandmother, father, mother, myself, and daughter Isobel, Paz. All; every one. Oh! Paz,' he say to me, 'England always been good enough for us till my turn come. Then I very bad young man--very dis--dis--dis--something he say. Now, he say, I have to be the first exile of family, I and poor little Isobel. No Leigh ever have to live abroad before!'"

"Did he say all that, Paz? Is this the truth?"

"Truff, sir! Sir, my father Spanish gentleman, my mother Carib lady. Very fine lady."

"All right. I beg your pardon. Never mind, I did not mean that. And so you remember when this Mr. Ritherdon was born, eh? Did the old gentleman seem pleased?"

"He very pleased about the son--very sad about the poor wife. He weep much, oh! many weeps. But he give us all money to drink Sebastian's health, and he tell us that as his poor wife dead. Mam Carmaux come keep the house and bring up little boy."

"Did he?" said Julian, and then lapsed into silence as they rode along. Yet, to himself he said continually: "What is this mystery? What is the root of it all? What is at the bottom? Somehow I feel as certain as that I am alive that I was this son--yet--yet--he was pleased--gave money--oh! shall I ever unravel it all?"

## CHAPTER XVI.

### **A DROP OF BLOOD**

They were drawing near the coast now as the sun sank slowly away over the crest of the Cockscomb mountains towards Guatemala; and already there were signs that the night--the swift night that comes to all spots which lie betwixt Capricorn and Cancer--was drawing near.

The sun, although now hidden behind the topmost ridge of the Cockscombs, was still an hour above the blue horizon, yet nevertheless the signs were apparent that he would soon be gone altogether. The parrots and the monkeys were becoming still and quiet in the branches--that is to say, as still and quiet as these screeching and chattering creatures ever do become in their native state--in dark and shade places where now the evening glow scarce penetrated, the fireflies gleamed little sparks and specks of molten gold; while, above all, there rose now from the earth that true tropical sign of coming night, the incense exuded by countless flowers and shrubs, as well as the cool damp of the earth when refreshed by the absence of the burning sun. Sometimes, too, across their path, an unmade one, or only made by the tracks of wild deer or the mountain cow, two or three of the former would glide swiftly and gracefully, seeking their lair, or the iguana would scuttle before their animals into the nearest copse, while the quash and gibbonet were often visible.

They rode slowly, not only because of the heat, but also because none could progress at a swift rate through those tangled copses, the trees of which were often hung with masses of wild vines whose tendrils met and interlaced with each other, so that sometimes almost a wall of network was encountered. Also they rode slowly, because Desolada was but a mile or so off now, and they would be within its precincts ere the sun was quite gone for the day. And as they did so in silence, Julian was acknowledging to himself that, with every fresh person he encountered and every fresh question he asked, his bewilderment was increased.

For now, by his side, rode this man, half Spaniard, half Indian, named Ignacio Paz, who not only had been present at the birth of Mr. Ritherdon's son, but also had known that son's mother before she was married. And, Julian asked himself, how did the knowledge now proclaimed by this man--this man who, if he possessed any feelings towards Sebastian possessed only those of hatred--this man who had prophesied for him a violent death as the reward of his brutality and cruelty--how did that knowledge make for or against the story told by George Ritherdon? Let him see.

It served above all to corroborate, to establish, Sebastian's position as the true son and inheritor of Charles Ritherdon. So truly an acknowledged son and inheritor that, undoubtedly no contrary proof could ever be brought of sufficiently powerful nature to overwhelm all that the evidence of the last twenty-five or twenty-six years affirmed. Had not this man, Paz, been one of those who had received money from Mr. Ritherdon to drink Sebastian's health? Surely--surely, therefore, the old man was satisfied that this was his son. And if he, Sebastian, was his son, who then was he, Julian?

On the other hand, the half-breed proved by old Mr. Leigh's conversation that there was some inaccuracy--perhaps an intentional inaccuracy--in Sebastian's statement that Miriam Carmaux, or Gardelle, was a relative of Isobel Leigh. That was undoubted! There was an inaccuracy. Old Leigh had definitely said that he was the first of his family who had ever been forced to earn a living in exile--yet she, this woman, with a French maiden, as well as married, name, was a native of New Orleans, was a Frenchwoman. Was it not enormous odds, therefore, against her being any connection of the English girl with the fair, wheat-coloured hair, the peachlike complexion, and the blue eyes who had been brought as an infant from Essex to Honduras?

Also, was it not immeasurably unlikely that, even if then the women were connected by blood, such coincidences should have occurred that both should have come to the colony at almost an identical time; that Mr. Ritherdon's wandering heart should have chanced to be captivated by each of those women; that he should have jilted the one for the other, and that eventually one, the jilted woman, should have dropped into the place of mistress of the household which death had caused the other to resign? What would the doctrine of chances say in connection with these facts, he would like to know?

"One other thing perplexes me, too," he thought to himself, as now they reached an open glade across which the swift departing sun streamed horizontally, "perplexes me marvellously. Does Sebastian know, does he dream, that against his position and standing such a story has been told as that narrated to me in England by my uncle--as still I believe him to be. And if--if there is some chicanery, some dark secret in connection with his and my birth, does he know of it--or is he inno----"

He paused, startled now at an incident that had happened, an incident that drove all reflection from his mind.

Across that glade there had come trotting easily, and evidently without any fear on its part, one of the red deer common enough in British Honduras. Only this deer was not as those are which sportsmen and hunters penetrate into the forests and the mountains to shoot and destroy; instead, it was one which Julian had himself seen roaming about the parklike grounds and surroundings of Desolada, the territory of which began on the other side of the open glade.

Yet this was not the incident, nor the portion of the incident which startled both him and Paz. Not that, but something else more serious than a tame deer crossing an open grassland a few

hundred yards in diameter each way. There was nothing to startle in that--though much to do so in what followed.

What followed being that as the deer, still slowly trotting over the broad-leaved grass, which here forms so luxurious a pasture for all kinds of cattle, came into line with Julian and Paz riding almost side by side, though with the latter somewhat ahead of the former--there came from out of the mangrove trees on the other side of the little opening, a spit of flame, a puff of smoke, and the sharp crack of a rifle, while, a second later, from off the side of a logwood tree close by them there fell a strip of bark to the ground.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Julian, his accustomed coolness not deserting him even at this agitating moment, "the gallant sportsman is a reckless kind of gentleman. One would think we were the game he is after and not the deer which, by-the-bye, has departed like a streak of greased lightning. I say, Paz, that bullet passed about three inches behind your head and not many more in front of my nose. People don't go out shooting human beings here as they do partridges at home, do they?" and he turned his eyes on his companion.

If, as an extra excitement to add to the incident, he had desired to observe now a specimen of native-born ferocity, he would have been gratified as he thus regarded Paz. For the man in whose veins ran the hot blood of a Spaniard, mixed with the still more hot and tempestuous blood of the Indian, seemed almost beside himself now with rage and fury. His dark coffee-hued skin had turned livid, his eyes glared like those of a maddened wolf, and his hands, which were now unstrapping the rifle that he too carried slung to his saddle, resembled masses of vibrating cords. Yet they became calm enough as, the antique long-barrelled weapon being released, he raised that rifle quickly, brought it to the shoulder and fired towards the exact spot whence they had observed the flame and smoke of the previous rifle to come.

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Julian, horrified at the act. "Great Heavens! Do you want to commit a murder? If the person who let drive at that deer has not moved away yet, you have very likely taken a human life."

But Paz, who seemed now to have recovered his equanimity and to have relieved his feelings entirely by that savage idea of retaliation, which had been not only sprung into his mind, but had also been instantly put into practice, only shrugged his shoulders indifferently while he re strapped his rifle. Then he pointed a long lean finger at the spot across the glade where the first discharge had taken place, directing the digit next to the spot where the deer had been, after which he pointed next to their heads and then to the tree, in which they could see the hole where the bullet was buried two or three inches. Having done all which, he muttered:

"Fired at the deer. At the deer! The deer was there--there--there," and he directed his eyes to a spot five yards off the line which would be drawn between the other side of the glade whence the fire had come and the deer, "and we are here. Tree here, too."

"What do you suspect?" Julian asked, white to the lips now himself--appalled at some hitherto unsuspected horror. "What? Whom?" And as he spoke his lips seemed to take the form of a name which, still, he hesitated to give utterance to.

"No," the half-caste said in reply, his quick intelligence grasping without the aid of any speech the identity of the man to whom Julian's expression pointed. "No. He is in Belize by now. He must be there. He has money--much money--to pay to lawyer this morning. Not him. Not him." After which the mysterious creature laughed in a manner that set Julian's mind reflecting on how he had heard the Indians of old laughed at the tortures endured by their victims.

"Come," he said now, feeling suddenly cold and chilled, as he had felt once or twice before in Desolada and its surroundings. "Come, let us go ho---back to the house," and he started the mustang forward on the route they had been following.

"No," Paz exclaimed, "however, not that way now. Other way. Quite as near. Also," and his dark eyes glistened strangely as he fastened them on Julian, "lead to hacienda. To Desolada. Come. We go through wood--over glade. Very nice wood."

"What do you expect to do there?" Julian asked, divining all the same.

"Oh! oh!" Paz said, his face alight with a demoniacal gleam. "Oh! oh! Perhaps find a body. Who knows? Gunny he shoot very straight. Perhaps a wounded man. Who knows?"

So they crossed the glade, making straight for the spot whence the murderous belch of flame had sprung forth, and, pushing aside flowering cacti and oleanders as well as other lightly knitted together shrubs and bushes, looked all around them. But, except that there were signs of footmarks on the bruised leaves of some of the greater shrubs and also that the undergrowth was a little trodden down, they saw nothing. Certainly nobody lay there, struck to death by Paz's bullet.

The keen eyes of the half-caste--glinting here and there and everywhere--and looking like dark topazes as the rays of the evening sun danced in them--seemed, however, to penetrate each inch of the surrounding shrubbery. And, at last, Julian heard him give a little gasp--it was almost a bleat--and saw him point with his finger at something about three feet from the ground.

At a leaf--a leaf of the wild oleander--on which was a speck that looked like a ladybird. Only--it was not that! But, instead, a drop of blood. A drop that glistened, as his eyes had glistened in the sun; a drop that a step or two further onward had a fellow. Then--nothing further.

"I hit him," Paz said, "somewhere. Only--did not kill." While, instantly he wheeled round and gazed full into Julian's eyes--his face expressing a very storm of demoniacal hate against the late owner of that drop.

"That," he almost hissed, "will keep. For a later day. When I know him."

They went now toward the house, each intent on his own meditations and with hardly a word spoken between them; or, at least, but a few words: Julian requesting Paz to say nothing of the incident, and the latter replying that by listening and not talking was the way to discover a secret.

"Ha! the gentle lady," said the half-breed now, as they observed Madame Carmaux seated on the veranda arranging some huge lilies in a glass bowl, while the form of Zara was observed disappearing into the house. "Ha! the gracious ruler and mistress." Then, as they drew near and stepped on to the veranda, Paz began bowing and scraping before the former with extraordinary deference. Yet, all the same, Julian observed that his eyes were roving everywhere around, and all over the boards near where Madame Carmaux sat, so that he wondered what it was for which the half-breed sought!

## **CHAPTER XVII.**

### **"SHE HATES HIM BECAUSE SHE LOVES HIM."**

"It would be folly," said Julian to himself that night, "not to recognise at once that each moment I spend in this house, or, indeed in this locality, is full of danger to me. Therefore, from this moment I commence to take every precaution that is possible. Now let us think out how to do it."

On this occasion he was the sole occupant of the lower veranda, in spite of its being quite early in the evening, and owing to the fact that Sebastian was passing the night in Belize, while Madame Carmaux, having announced that she had a severe headache, had taken herself off to her own room before supper, he had partaken of that meal alone. So that he sat there quite by himself now, smoking; and, as a matter of fact, he was not at all sorry to do so.

He recognised that any attempt at conversation with the "gentle lady" as Paz had termed her--in an undoubtedly ironical and subacid manner--was the veriest make-believe; while, as to Sebastian, when he was at home--well, his conversation was absolutely uninteresting. He never talked of anything but gambling and the shortness of ready money, diversified occasionally by a torrent of questions as to what George Ritherdon had done and what he had said during the whole time of his life in England. While, as Julian reflected, or, indeed, now felt perfectly sure, that even this wearisome talk was but assumed as a mask or cloak to the other's real thoughts, it was not likely that Sebastian's absence to-night could be a cause of much regret.

"Let me think out how to do it," he said again, continuing his meditations; "let me regard the whole thing from its proper aspect. I am in danger. But of what at the worst? Well, at the worst--death. There is, it is very evident, a strong determination on the part of some people in this place to relieve the colony of my interesting presence. First, Sebastian tries to break my neck with an untrained horse; next, some one probably places a coral snake in my bed; while, thirdly, some creature of his endeavours to shoot me. Paz--who seems to have imbibed many ancient ideas from his Spanish and savage ancestors--appears, however, if I understand him, to imagine he was the person shot at, his wild and barbaric notions about the sacredness of the guest making him suppose, apparently that my life could not be the one aimed at. Well, let him think so. At any rate, his feelings of revenge and hatred are kept at boiling-pitch against some unknown enemy.

"Now," he went on, with still that light and airy manner of looking at difficulties (even difficulties that at this time seemed to be assuming a horrible, not to say, hideous, aspect) which had long since endeared him to countless comrades in the wardroom and elsewhere. "Now, I will take a little walk in the cool of the evening. Dear Madame Carmaux's headache has deprived her of the pearls of my conversation, wherefore I will, as her countrymen say, 'go and take the air.'"

Upon which he rose from his seat, and, pushing aside the wicker table on which stood a bottle of Bourbon whisky, a syphon, and also a pen and ink with some writing-paper, he took from off it

a letter directed and stamped, and dropped it into the pocket of his white jacket.

"The creole negro--as they call those chaps here--passes the foot of the garden in five minutes' time," he said to himself, looking at a fine gold watch which he had gained as a prize at Greenwich, "and he will convey this to Spranger's hands. Afterwards, from to-night, I will make it my business to send one off from All Pines every day. I should like Spranger and Beat--I mean Miss Spranger--to receive a daily bulletin of my health henceforth.

"Sebastian," he continued to reflect, as now he made his way beneath the palms towards where the road ran, far down at the foot of the garden, "has meditations about being my heir--well, so have I about being his. Yet I think, I do really think, I would rather be Sebastian's if it's all the same to him. Nevertheless, in case anything uncomfortable should happen to me, I should like Spranger and Beat--Miss Spranger, to be acquainted with the fact. It might make the succession easier to--Sebastian."

He heard the "creole negro's" cart coming along, even as he reached the road; he heard also the chuckles and whoops with which the conveyer of her Majesty's mails urged on the flea-bitten, raw-boned creature that carried them; and then, the cart drew into sight and was pulled up suddenly as Julian emerged into the road.

"Hoop! Massa Sebastian, you give me drefful fright," the sable driver began, "thought it was your ghost, as I see you in Belize this berry morning----"

"So it would have been his ghost," remarked Julian, as he came close to the cart with the letter in his hand, "if you had happened to see him now. Meanwhile, kindly take this letter and put it in your mail-bag."

"Huah! huah!" grunted the negro, while he held out his great black hand for the missive and, opening the mouth of the bag which was in the cart behind him, thrust it in on the top of all the others he had collected on his route along the coast; "he get there all right about two o'clock this morning. But, massa, you berry like Massa Sebastian. In um white jacket you passy well for um ghost or brudder."

"So they tell me," Julian answered lightly. "But, you see, we happen to be cousins, and, sometimes, cousins are as much alike as brothers. My friend," he said, changing the subject, "are you a teetotaller?"

"Hoop! Huah! Teetotallum. Huah! Teetotallum! Yes, massa, when I've no money. Then berry good teetotallum. Berry good."

"Well, now see, here is some money," and he gave the man a small piece of silver. "Take a drink at All Pines as you go by; it will keep this limekiln sort of air out of your throat--or wash it down. Off with you, only take two drinks. Have the second when you get to Belize."

Profuse in thanks, the darkey drove off, wishing Julian good-night, while the latter's cheery, "Good-night, fair nymph," seemed to him so exquisite a piece of humour that, for some paces along the road, the former could hear him chuckling and murmuring in his musical bass: "Fair nymph. Hoah! Fair nymph. Hoah! Fair nymph. That's me."

"Now," Julian said to himself as he strolled along the road, "we shall see if Spranger comes to meet me as he said he would if I wanted his assistance. If he doesn't, then bang goes this one into the All Pines post-box to-morrow;" the "this one" being an exact duplicate of the letter which the negro postman had at that moment in his mail-bag.

"I'm getting incredibly cunning," Julian murmured to himself, "shockingly so. Yet, what is one to do? One must meet ruse with ruse and cunning with cunning, and I do believe Sebastian is as artful as a waggon-load of monkeys. However, if things go wrong with me, if I should get ill--Sebastian says the climate is bad and lays a good deal of stress on the fact, although other people say it's first-rate---or disappear, or furnish a subject for a first-class funeral, there is one consolation. Spranger, on not hearing from me, will soon begin to make inquiries and, as the novelists say, 'I shall not die unavenged.' That's something."

It is permissible for those who record veracious chronicles such as this present one, to do many things that in ordinary polite society would not be tolerated. Thus, we have accompanied Julian to his bedchamber on more than one occasion, and now we will look over his shoulder as, an hour before this period, he indited the letter to Mr. Spranger (which at the present moment is in the Belize post-cart), and afterwards made a copy of it for posting the next day at All Pines.

It was not a lengthy document--since the naval officer generally writes briefly, succinctly and to the purpose--and simply served to relate the various startling "incidents" which had occurred after he had returned to Desolada. And he told Mr. Spranger that, henceforth, a letter would be posted for him at All Pines every day, which, so long as it conveyed no tidings of ill news, required no answer; but that, if such letter should fail to come, then Spranger might imagine that he stood in need of succour. It concluded by saying that if this gentleman had a few hours to spare next day and could meet him half-way betwixt Belize and Desolada--say, opposite a spot called Commerce Bight--he would take it as a favour--would meet him, say, in the early morning, about ten o'clock, before the heat was too great.

"Sebastian," the letter ended, "seems to harp more, now, on the fact that he's my heir than on anything else. He evidently imagines that I have more to leave than I have. But, however that may be, I don't want him to inherit yet."

He was thinking about this letter, and its duplicate which was to follow to-morrow, if the first one did not bring his friend from Belize, when he heard voices near him--voices that were pitched low and coming closer with every step he took, and then, suddenly, he came upon the girl, Zara, and the man, Ignacio Paz, walking along the road side by side.

"Well, my Queen of Night," he said to the former, "and how are you? You heard that I found the snake after all, I suppose?"

"Yes, I heard," the girl said, her dark slumbrous eyes gleaming at him in the light of the stars. "I heard. Better always look. This is a dangerous land. Very dangerous to white men."

"So Sebastian tells me. Thank you, Zara. Henceforth I will be sure to look. I am going to take a great deal of care of my precious health while I am in this neighbourhood."

"That is well," the girl said; then, having noticed his bantering manner, she added, "you may laugh--make joke, but it is no joke. Take care," and a moment later she was gone swiftly up to the house, leaving him and his companion of the morning standing together in the dusty road.

"I wonder why Zara is such a good friend of mine?" Julian asked meditatively now, looking into the eyes of Paz, which themselves gleamed brightly.

"You wonder?" the half-caste said, with that bleating little laugh which always sounded so strangely in Julian's ears. "*Do* you wonder? Can't you guess? Do you wonder, too, why I'm a friend of yours?"

"You, Paz! Why we've only known each other about fifteen hours. Though I'm glad to hear it, all the same."

"Friends long enough to nearly get killed together to-day," the man replied. "That's one reason."

"And the other--Zara's reasons? What are they?"

Again the man's eyes glistened in the starlight; then he put out his long lithe finger, which, Indianlike, he used to emphasize most of his remarks.

"She hates him. So do I."

"You I can understand. He beat you this morning. But--Zara! I thought she was his faithful adherent."

"She hates him because," the man replied laconically, "she loves him."

"Loves him. And he? Well--what?"

"Not love her. He love 'nother. English missy. You know her."

"I do," Julian answered emphatically. "I do. Now, I'll add my share to this little love story. She, the English missy, does not love him."

"Zara think she do. Thinks he with her now. Go Belize, see her."

"Bah! Bosh! The English missy wouldn't--why, Paz," he broke off suddenly, "what's this in your hand? Haven't you had enough sport to-day--or are you going out shooting the owls to-night for a change?" while as he spoke he pointed to a small rifle the half-caste held in his hand. "Though," he added, "one doesn't shoot birds with rifles."

"No," the other replied, with again the bleat, and with, now, his eyes blazing--"no. Shoot men with him. Nearly shoot one to-day. I find him near where I find drop of blood this afternoon. Hid away under ferns. I take a little walk this evening in the cool. Then I find him."

## **CHAPTER XVIII.**

### **SEBASTIAN IS DISTURBED**

"This knoll is becoming historic," Julian said to himself the next morning, as he halted the mustang where twice he had halted it before, when he had been journeying the other way from that which he had now come. "When, some day, the life and adventures of Admiral Ritherdon, K.C.B., and so forth, are given to an admiring world, it must figure in them. Make a pretty frontispiece, too, with its big shady palms and the blue sea beyond the mangroves down below."

In spite, however, of his bright and buoyant nature, which refused to be depressed or subdued by the atmosphere of doubt or suspicion--to give that atmosphere no more important name--he recognised very clearly that matters were serious with him. He knew, too, that the calamities which had approached, without absolutely overwhelming him--so far--were something more than coincidences; natural enough as each by itself might have been in a country which, even now, can scarcely be called anything else than a wild and unsettled one.

"I was once flung off a horse, a buckjumper," he reflected, "in Western Australia when I was a 'sub'; I found a snake in my bed in Burmah; and a chap shot at me once in Vera Cruz--but--but," and he nodded his head meditatively over his recollections, "the whole lot did not happen together in Australia or Burmah or Vera Cruz. If they had done so, it would have appeared rather pointed. And--well--they *have* all happened together here. That looks rather pointed, too."

"All the same," Julian went on reflectively, as now he tethered the mustang to a bush where it could stand in the shade, and also drew himself well under the spreading branches of the palms--"all the same, I can't and won't believe that Sebastian sees danger to his very firmly-established rights by my presence here. He said on that first night to Madame Carmaux, 'Knowledge is not proof,' and what proof have I against him? This copy of my baptism at New Orleans which I possess can't outweigh that entry of his birth which Spranger has seen in Belize. And there is nothing else. Nothing! Except George Ritherdon's statement to me, which nobody would believe. My own opinion is," he concluded, "that Sebastian, who at the best is a rough, untutored specimen of the remote colonist, with very little knowledge of the world beyond, thinks that if anything happened to me he would only have to put in a claim to whatever I have in England, prove his cousinship, and be put in possession of my few thousands. What a sublime confidence he must have in the simplicity of the English laws!"

Even, however, as he thought all this, there came to him a recollection, a revived memory, of something that had struck him after George Ritherdon's death--something that, in the passage of so many other stirring events, had of late vanished from his mind.

"He said," Julian murmured to himself--"my uncle said in the letter I received when we got back to Portsmouth, that he had commenced to write down the error, the crime of his life, in case he did not live to see me. And--and--later--after he had told me all, on the next day, he remarked that the whole account was written down; that when--poor old fellow! he was gone I should find it in his desk; that it would serve to refresh my memory. But--I never did find it, and, I suppose, he thought it was best destroyed. I wish, however, he hadn't done it; even his handwriting would have been some corroboration of the statement. At least it would have shown, if I ever do make the statement public, that I had not invented it."

While he had been indulging in these meditations he had kept his eyes fixed on the long, white, dusty road that stretched from where the knoll was on which he sat toward Belize; a road which, through this flat country, could be traced for two or three miles, it looking like a white thread lying on a dark green carpet the colour of which had been withered by the sun.

And now, as he looked, he saw upon the farthest end of that thread a speck, even whiter than itself--a speck, that is to say, white above and black beneath--which was gradually travelling along the road, coming nearer and growing bigger each moment.

"It may be Mr. Spranger," he thought to himself, still watching the oncoming party-coloured patch as it continued to loom larger; "probably is. Yet for a man of his time of life, and in such a baker's oven as that road is, he is a bold rider. I hope he won't get a sunstroke or a touch of heat apoplexy in his efforts to come and meet me."

At last, however, the person, whoever it was, drew so near that the rider's white tropical jacket stood out quite distinct from the black coat of the animal he bestrode; while, also, the great white sombrero on the man's head was distinctly visible.

"That's not Spranger," Julian said to himself, "but a much younger man. By Jove!" he exclaimed, "it's Sebastian. And I might have expected it to be him. Of course. It is about the time he would be returning to Desolada."

His recognition of his cousin was scarcely accomplished beyond all doubt, when Sebastian's horse began to slow down in its stride, owing to having commenced the ascent of the incline that led up to the knoll where Julian sat, and in a very few more moments the animal, emitting great gusts from its nostrils, had brought its rider close to where he was. While, true to his determination to exhibit no outward sign of anything he might suspect concerning Sebastian's designs toward him, as well as to resolve to assume a light and cheerful manner, and also a friendly one, Julian called out pleasantly:

"Halloa, Sebastian! How are you this fine morning? Rather a hot ride from Belize, isn't it?"

If, however, he had expected an equally cordial greeting in return, or, to put it in other and more appropriate words, a similar piece of acting on Sebastian's part, he was very considerably mistaken. For, instead of his cousin returning his cheerful salutation in a corresponding manner, his reception of it betokened something that might very well have been considered to be dismay. Indeed, he reined his horse up so suddenly as almost to throw the panting creature on its haunches, in spite of the ascent it was making; while his face, sunbrowned and burned as it was, seemed to grow nearly livid behind the bronze. His eyes also had in them the startled expression which might possibly be observed in those of a man who had suddenly been confronted by a spectre.

"Why!" he said, a moment later, after peering about and around and into all the rich luxuriant vegetation which grew on the knoll, as though he might have expected to see some other person sitting among the wild allamandas or ixoras--"why, what on earth are you doing here, Julian? I--I thought you were at Desolada, or--or perhaps out shooting again. By the way, I had left Desolada before you were up yesterday morning; what sort of a day did you have of it?"

"Most exciting," Julian replied, himself as cool as ice. "Quite a field-day." And then he went on to give his cousin, who had by now dismounted and was sitting near him, a *résumé* of the whole day's adventures--not forgetting to tell him also of the interesting discovery of the coral snake in his bed.

"If," he thought to himself, "he wants to see how little he can frighten one of her Majesty's sailors, he shall see it now."

He had, however, some slight hesitation in narrating the retaliation of Paz upon the unknown, would-be assassin--for such the person must have been who had fired at where the deer was not--he being in some doubt as to how this fact would be received.

At first it was listened to in silence, Sebastian only testifying how much he was impressed at the recountal by the manner in which he kept his eyes fixed on Julian--and also by the whiteness of his lips, to which the circulation seemed unable to find its way. Also, it seemed as though, when he heard of the drop of blood upon the leaf, once more the blood in his own veins was impeded--and as if his heart was standing still. Then, when the recital was concluded, he said:

"Paz did right. It was a cowardly affair. I wish he had killed the villain. I suppose it was some enemies of his. Some fellow half-caste. Paz has enemies," he added.

"Probably," said Julian quietly.

"And," went on Sebastian now in a voice of considerable equanimity, though still his bronze and sunburn were not what they usually were; "and how did you leave Madame Carmaux? Was she not horrified at such a dastardly outrage?"

"I did not have much time with her. Not time enough indeed to tell her. She went to bed directly I got back----"

"Went to bed! Why?"

"She was not well. Said she had a headache, or rather sent word to that effect. Nor did she come down to breakfast. Rather slow, you know, all alone by myself, so I thought I'd come on here for a ride. Must do something with one's time."

"Of course! Of course! I told you Desolada was Liberty Hall. Went to bed, eh? I hope she is not really ill. I don't know what I should do without her," and as he spoke Julian observed that, if anything, he was whiter than before. Evidently he was very much distressed at Madame Carmaux's suffering from even so trifling an ailment as a headache.

"I think I'll get on now," Sebastian said, rising from where he was sitting. "If she is laid up I shall have a good deal of extra work to do, I suppose it really is a headache."

"I suppose it is," Julian said, "it is not likely to be much else. She was arranging flowers in a vase when Paz and I returned."

"Was she!" Sebastian exclaimed, almost gleefully; "was she! Oh, well! then there can't be much the matter with her, can there? I am glad to hear that. But, anyhow, I'll go on now. You'll be back by sundown, I suppose. You know it's bad to be out just at sunset. The climate is a tricky one."

"So I have heard you say. Never mind, I'll be back in the evening, or before. Meanwhile I may wander into the woods and shoot a monkey or so."

"Shoot! Why! you haven't got a gun with you," Sebastian exclaimed, looking on the ground and at the mustang's back where, probably, such a thing would have been strapped.

"No, I haven't. But I've always got this," and he showed the handle of his revolver in an inside pocket.

"You're a wise man. Though, if you knew the colony better, you'd understand there isn't much



danger to human life here."

"There was yesterday. And Paz has taught me a trick or two. If any one fired at me now I should do just what he did, and, perhaps, I too might find a leaf with a drop of blood on it afterwards."

"You're a cool fish!" exclaimed Sebastian after bursting out into a loud laugh which, somehow, didn't seem to have much of the ring of mirth in it. "Upon my word you are. Well, so long! Don't go committing murder, that's all."

"No, I won't. Bye-bye. I'll be back to-night."

After which exchange of greetings, Sebastian got on his horse and prepared to continue his journey to Desolada.

"By the way," he said, however, before doing so, "about that snake! How could it have got into your bed?"

"I don't know," Julian replied with a half laugh. "How should I? The coral snake is a new acquaintance, though I've known other specimens in my time. It got there somehow, didn't it?"

"Of course! They love warmth, you know. Perhaps it climbed up the legs of the bed and crept in where it would be covered up."

"It was rather rude to do such a thing in a visitor's bed though, wasn't it? It isn't as though I was one of the residents. And it must have been a clever chap, too, because it got in without disarranging the mosquito curtains the least little bit. That *was* clever, when you come to think of it!"

At which Sebastian gave a rather raucous kind of laugh, and then set his horse in motion.

"*Au revoir!*" said Julian. "I hope you'll find Madame Carmaux much better when you get back."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A PLEASANT MEETING

The morning was drawing on and it was getting late--that is, for the tropics--namely, it was near nine o'clock, and soon the sun would be high in the heavens, so that it was not likely along the dusty white road from Belize any sign of human life would make its appearance until sunset was close at hand.

"If Mr. Spranger doesn't come pretty soon," Julian said consequently to himself, "he won't come at all, and has, probably, important business to attend to in the city. Wherefore I shall have to pass to-day alone here, or have a sunstroke before I can get as far back as All Pines for a meal. I ought to have brought some lunch with me."

"Halloa, my friend," he remarked a moment later to the mustang, which had commenced to utter little whinnies, and seemed to be regarding him with rather a piteous sort of look, "what's the matter with you? You don't want to start back and get a sunstroke, do you? Oh! I know. Of course!" and he rose from his seat and, going further into the bushes behind the knoll, began to use both his eyes and his ears. For it had not taken him a moment to divine--he who had been round the world three times! that the creature required that which in all tropical lands is wanted by man and animal more than anything else--namely, the wherewithal to quench their thirst.

Presently, he heard the grateful sound of trickling water, which in British Honduras is bountifully supplied by Providence, and discovered a swift-flowing rivulet on its way to the sea below--it being, in fact, a little tributary of Mullin's River--when, going back for the creature, he led it to where the water was, while, tying its bridle to some reeds, he left it there to quench its thirst. After which he returned to the summit of the knoll to continue his lookout along the road from Belize.

But now he saw that, during his slight absence, some signs of other riders had appeared, there being at this present moment two black-and-white blurs upon the white dusty thread. Two that progressed side by side, and presented a duplicate, party-coloured imitation of that which, earlier, Sebastian Ritherdon and his steed had offered to his view.

"If that's Mr. Spranger," Julian thought to himself, "he has brought a companion with him, or has picked up a fellow traveller. By Jove though! one's a darkey and, well! I declare, the other's a woman. Oh!" he exclaimed suddenly, joyfully too; "it's Miss Spranger. Here's luck!" and with that, regardless of the sun's rays and all the calamities that those rays can bring in such a land, he jumped into the road and began waving his handkerchief violently.

The signal, he saw, was returned at once; from beneath the huge green umbrella held over the young lady's head--and his own--by the negro accompanying her, he observed an answering handkerchief waved, and then the mass of white material which formed a veil thrown back, as though she was desirous that he who was regarding her should not be in any doubt as to who was approaching. Yet, she need not have been thus desirous. There is generally one form (as the writer has been told by those who know) which, when we are young, or sometimes even, no longer boys and girls, we recognise easily enough, no matter how much it may be disguised by veils or dust-coats or other similar impediments to our sight.

Naturally, Beatrix and her sable companion rode slowly--to ride fast here on such a morning means death, or something like it--but they reached the knoll at last, and then, after mutual greetings had been exchanged and Julian had lifted Miss Spranger off her horse--one may suppose how tenderly!--she said:

"Father was sorry, but he could not come. So I came instead. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind!" he said, while all the time he was thinking how pretty she looked in her white dress, and how fascinating the line which marked the distinction between the sunburn of her face and the whiteness of her throat made her appear--"mind!" Then, words seeming somehow to fail him (who rarely was at a loss for such things, either for the purpose of jest or earnest) at this moment, he contented himself with a glance only, and in preparing for her a suitable seat in the shade. Yet, all the same, he was impelled directly afterwards to tell her again and again how much he felt her goodness in coming at all.

"Jupiter," she said to the negro now, "bring the horses in under the shade and unsaddle and unbridle them. And, find some 'water for them. I am going to stay quite a time, you know," she went on, addressing Julian. "I can't go back till sunset, or near sunset, so you will have to put up with my company for a whole day. I suppose you didn't happen to think of bringing any lunch or other provisions?"

"The mere man is forgetful," he replied contritely, finding his tongue once more, "so----"

"So I am aware. Therefore, I have brought some myself. Oh! yes, quite enough for two, Mr. Ritherdon; therefore you need not begin to say you are not hungry or anything of that sort. Later, Jupiter shall unpack it. Meanwhile, we have other things to think and talk about. Now, please, go on with that," and she pointed to the pipe in his hand which he had let go out in her presence, "and tell me everything. Everything from the time you left us."

Obedient to her orders and subject to no evesdropping by the discreet Jupiter--who, having been told by Julian where the rivulet was, had conducted the two fresh horses there and was now seated on the bank crooning a mournful ditty which, the former thought, might have been sung by some African sorcerer to his barbaric ancestors--he did tell her everything. He omitted nothing, from the finding of the coral-snake in his bed to his last meeting with Sebastian half an hour ago.

While the girl sitting there by his side, her pure clear eyes sometimes fixed on the narrator's face and sometimes gazing meditatively on the sapphire Caribbean sparkling a mile off in front of them, listened to and drank in and weighed every word.

"Lieutenant Ritherdon," she said, when he had concluded, and placing her hand boldly, and without any absurd false shame, upon his sleeve, "you must give me a promise--a solemn promise--that you will never go back to that place again."

"But!" he exclaimed startled, "I must go back. I cannot leave and give up my quest like that. And," he added, a little gravely, "remember I am a sailor, an officer. I cannot allow myself to be frightened away from my search in such a manner."

"Not for----" she began interrupting.

"Not for what?" he asked eagerly, feeling that if she said, "not for my sake?" he must comply.

"Not for your life? Its safety? Not for that?" she concluded, almost to his disappointment. "May you not retreat to preserve your life?"

"No," he answered a moment later. "No, not even for that. For my own self-respect, my own self-esteem I must not do so. Miss Spranger," he continued, speaking almost rapidly now, "I know well enough that I shall do no good there; I have come to understand at last that I shall never discover the truth of the matter. Yet I do believe all the same that George Ritherdon was my uncle, that Charles Ritherdon was my father, that Sebastian Ritherdon is a--well, that there is some tricking, some knavery in it all. But," he continued bitterly, "the trickery has been well played, marvellously well managed, and I shall never unearth the method by which it has been

done."

"Yet, thinking this, you will not retreat! You will jeopardize your life?"

"I have begun," he said, "and I cannot retreat, short of absolute, decisive failure. Of certain failure! And, oh! you must see why, you must understand why, I can not--it is because my life is in jeopardy that I cannot do so. I embarked on this quest expecting to find no difficulties, no obstacles in my way; I came to this country and, at once, I learned that my appearance here, at Desolada, meant deadly peril to me. And, because of that deadly peril, I must, I will, go on. I will not draw back; nor be frightened by any danger. If I did I should hate myself forever afterwards; I should know myself unworthy to ever wear her Majesty's uniform again. I will never draw back," he repeated emphatically, "while the danger continues to exist."

As he had spoken, Julian Ritherdon--the bright, cheery Englishman, full of joke and quip, had disappeared: in his place had come another Julian--the Englishman of stern determination, of iron nerve; the man who, because peril stared him in the face and environed his every footstep, was resolute to never retreat before that danger.

While she, the girl sitting by his side, her eyes beaming with admiration (although he did not see them), knew that, as he had said, so he would do. This man--fair, young, good-looking, and *insouciant*--was, beneath all that his intercourse with the world and society had shaped him into being, as firm as steel, as solid as a rock.

What could she answer in return?

"If you are so determined," she said now, controlling her voice for fear that, through it, she should betray her admiration for his strength and courage, "you will, at least take every measure for your self-preservation. Write every day, as you have said you will in your letter to my father, be ever on your guard--by night and day. Oh!" she went on, thrusting her hands through the beautiful hair from which she had removed her large Panama hat for coolness while in the shade, "I sicken with apprehension when I think of you alone in that mournful, mysterious house."

"You need not," he said, and now he too ventured to touch her sleeve as she had previously touched his--"you need not do so. Remember, it is man to man at the worst; Sebastian Ritherdon--if he is Sebastian Ritherdon--against Julian. And I, at least, am used to facing risks and dangers. It is my trade."

"No," she answered, almost with a shudder, while her lustrous eyes expressed something that was very nearly, if not quite, horror--"no! it is not. It is a man and a woman--and that a crafty, scheming woman--against a man. Against you. Lieutenant Ritherdon," she cried, "can you doubt who--who----"

"Hush," he said, "hush. Not yet. Let us judge no one yet. Though I--believe me--I doubt nothing. I, too, can understand. But," he went on a little more lightly now, "remember, Sebastian is not the only one possessed of a female auxiliary, of female support. Remember, I have Zara."

"Zara," she repeated meditatively, "Zara. The girl with whom he amused himself by making believe that he loved her; made her believe that, when this precious Madame Carmaux should be removed, she might reign over his house as his wife."

"Did he do that?"

"He did. If all accounts are true he led her to believe he loved her until he thought another woman--a woman who would not have let him serve her as a groom--might look favourably on his pretensions."

"Therefore," said Julian, ignoring the latter part of her remark, though understanding not only it, but the deep contempt of her tone, "therefore, now she hates him. May she not be a powerful ally of mine, in consequence. That is, if she does hate him, as my other ally--Paz--says."

"Yes, yes," Beatrix said, still musing, still reflectively. "Yet, if so, why those mysterious visits to your bedroom window, why that haunting the neighbourhood of your room at midnight?"

"I understand those visits now, I think I understand them, since the episode of the coral snake. I believe she was constituting herself a watch, a guard over me. That she knows much--that--that she suspects more. That she will at the worst, if it comes, help me to--to thwart him."

"Ah! if it were so. If I could believe it."

"And Paz, too. Sebastian told me to-day that Paz has enemies. Well! doubtless he has--only, I would rather be Paz than one of those enemies. You would think so yourself if you had seen the blaze of the man's eyes, the look upon his face, when that shot was fired, and, later, when he showed me the rifle which he had found close by the spot. No; I should not like to be one of Paz's enemies nor--a false lover of Zara's."

"If I could feel as confident as you!" Beatrix exclaimed. "Oh! if I could. Then--then--" but she could find no ending for her sentence.

## CHAPTER XX.

### LOVE'S BLOSSOM

A fortnight had elapsed since that meeting on the palm-clad knoll, and Julian was still an inmate of Desolada. But each day as it came and went--while it only served to intensify his certainty that some strange trickery had been practised at the time when he was gone and when George Ritherdon had stolen him from his dying, or dead, mother's side--served also to convince him that he would never find out the manner in which the deceit had been practised, nor unravel the clue to that deceit. He had, too, almost decided to take his farewell of Desolada and its inmates, to shake the dust of the place off his shoes, and to abandon any idea of endeavouring to obtain further corroboration of his uncle's statement.

For he had come to believe, to fear, that no corroboration was to be found. Every one in British Honduras regarded Sebastian as the undoubted child and absolute heir of the late Charles Ritherdon, while, in addition, there were still scores of persons alive, black and white and half-caste, who remembered the birth of the boy, though not one individual could be discovered who had heard even a whisper of any kidnapping having ever taken place. Once, Julian had thought that a journey to New Orleans and a verification of the copy of his baptismal certificate with the original might be of some use, but on reflection he had decided that this, as against the certificate of Sebastian's baptism in Belize, would be of no help whatever.

"It is indeed a dead wall, a solid rock, against which I am pushing, as Mr. Spranger said," he muttered to himself again and again. "And it is too firm for me. I shall have to retreat--not because I fear my foe, but because that foe has no tangible shape against which to contend."

He had not returned to Desolada on the night that followed his meeting with, first, Sebastian on the knoll and then with Beatrix; he making his appearance at that place about dawn on the following morning. The reason whereof was, that, after passing the whole day with Miss Spranger on that spot (the lunch she had brought with her being amply sufficient to provide an afternoon, or evening, meal), he had insisted on escorting her back to her father's house.

At first she protested against his doing this, she declaring that Jupiter was quite sufficient cavalier for her, but he would take no denial and was firm in his resolve to do so. He did not tell her, though (as perhaps, there was no necessity for him to do, since, if all accounts are true, young ladies are very apt at discovering the inward workings of those whom they like and by whom they are liked), that he regarded this opportunity as a most fortuitous one, and, as such, not to be missed. Who is there amongst us all who, given youth and strength and the near presence of a woman whom we are fast beginning to love with our whole heart, would not sacrifice a night's rest to ride a score of miles by her side? Not one who is worthy to win that woman's love!

So through the tropical night--where high above them blazed the constellations of the Southern Crown, the Peacock, and the Archer, with their incandescentlike glow--those two rode side by side; the negro on ahead and casting many a glance of caution around at bush and shrub and clump of palm and mangrove. Of love they did not speak, for a sufficient reason; each knew that it was growing and blossoming in the other's heart--that it was there! The man's love there--in his heart, not only because of the girl's winsome beauty; but born and created also by the knowledge that she went hand in hand with him in all that he was endeavouring to accomplish; the woman's love engendered by her recognition of his bravery and strength of character. If she had not come to love him before, she did so when he exclaimed that, because the danger was near to and threatening him, he would never desist from the task on which he had embarked.

But love often testifies its existence otherwise than in words, and it did so now--not only in the subdued tones of their voices as they fell on the luscious sultry air of the night, but also in the understanding which they came to as to how they should be in constant communication with each other in the future, so that, if aught of evil befell Julian at Desolada, Beatrix might not be long unaware of the evil.

"Perhaps," Julian said, as now they were drawing near Belize--"perhaps it will not be necessary that I should apprise you each day of my safety, of the fact that everything is all right with me. Therefore----"

"I must know frequently! hear often," Beatrix said, turning her eyes on him. "I must. Oh! Mr. Ritherdon, forty-eight hours will appear an eternity to me, knowing, as I shall know, that you are in that dreadful house. Alone, too, and with none to help you. What may they not attempt against

you next!"

"Whatever they attempt," he replied, "will, I believe, be thwarted. I take Paz and Zara--especially Zara, now that you tell me she is a jilted woman--against Sebastian and Madame Carmaux. But, to return to my communications with you."

"Yes," she said, with an inward catching of her breath--"yes, your communications with me."

"Let it be this way. If you do not hear from me at the end of every forty-eight hours, then begin to think that things may be going wrong with me; while if, at the end of a second forty-eight hours, you have still heard nothing from me, well! consider that they have gone very wrong indeed. Shall it be like that?"

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed with almost a gasp, "I am appalled. Appalled even at the thought that such an arrangement, such precautions, should have to be made."

"Of course, they may not be necessary," he said; "after all, we may be misjudging Sebastian."

"We are not," she answered emphatically. "I feel it; I know it. I mistrust that man--I have always disliked him. I feel as sure as it is possible to be that he meditates harm to you. And--and--" she almost sobbed, "what is to be done if the second forty-eight hours have passed, and still I have heard nothing from or of you."

"Then," he said with a light laugh--"then I think I should warn some of those gentry whom we have seen loafing about Belize in a light and tasteful uniform--the constabulary, aren't they?--that a little visit to Desolada might be useful."

"Oh!" Beatrix cried again now, "don't make a joke of it, Mr. Ritherdon! Don't, pray don't. You cannot understand how I feel, nor what my fears are. If four days went by and I heard no tidings of you, I should begin to think that--that----"

"No," he said, interrupting her. "No. Don't think that! Whatever Sebastian may suspect me of knowing, he would not do what you imagine. He would not----"

"Kill you, you would say! Why, then, should he mount you on that horse? And--and was--there no intention of killing you when the coral snake was found in your bed--a deadly, venomous reptile, whose bite is always fatal within the hour--nor when that shot was fired at you?"

"Is there not a chance," Julian said now, asking a question instead of answering one, "that, after all, we are entirely on a wrong tack, granting even that Sebastian is in a false position--a position that by right is mine?"

"What can you mean? How can we be on a false tack?"

"In this way. Even should it be as I suggest, namely, that he is--well, the wrong man, how is it possible that he should be aware of it; above all, how is it possible that he should know that I am aware of it? He has been at Desolada, and held the position of heir to--to--to my father ever since he was a boy, a baby. If wrong has been done, he was not and could not be the doer of it. Therefore, why should he suspect me of being the right man, and consequently wish to injure me?"

"Surely the answer is clear enough," Beatrix replied. "However innocent he may once have been of all knowledge of a wrong having been done, he possesses that knowledge now--in some way. And," the girl went on, turning her face towards him as she spoke, so that he could see her features plainly in the starlight, "he knows that it is to you it has been done. Would not that suffice to make him meditate harm to you?"

"Yet, granting this, how--how can it be? How can he have discovered the wrongdoing. A wrongdoing that his father--his supposed father--died without suspecting."

"Yes, that is it; that is what puzzles me more than all else," Beatrix exclaimed, "that Mr. Ritherdon should have died without suspecting.' That is it. It is indeed marvellous that he could have been imposed upon from first to last."

Then for a time they rode on in silence, each deep in their own thoughts: a silence broken at last by Beatrix saying--

"Whatever the secret is, I am convinced that one other person knows it besides himself."

"Madame Carmaux?"

"Yes, Madame Carmaux. If we could find out what her influence over him is, or rather what makes her so strong an ally of his, then I feel sure that all would be as clear as day."

These conversations caused Julian ample food for meditation as he rode back towards Desolada in the coolness of the dawn--a roseate and primrose hued dawn--after having left Beatrix Spranger at her father's house.

What was Madame Carmaux's influence over Sebastian? Why was she so strong an ally of his? And for answer to his self-communications, he could find only one. The answer that this woman, who had been bereft in one short year of the husband she had hurriedly espoused in her bitterness of desolation as well as of the little infant daughter who had come as a solace to her misery, had transferred all the affection left in her heart to the boy she found at Desolada; no matter whom that boy might be.

An affection that year following year had caused to ripen until, at last, her very existence had become bound up in his. This, combined with the fact that Desolada had been her home, and that home a comfortable one, over which she had ruled as mistress for so many years, was the only answer he could find.

All was very still as he rode into the back part of the mansion where the stables were--for it was now but little after four o'clock, and consequently there was hardly daylight yet--when, unsaddling the mustang himself, he closed the stable door again and prepared to make his way into the house. This was easy enough to do, since, in such a climate, windows were never closed at night, and, beyond the persianas, which could easily be lifted aside, there was no bar to any one's entrance.

Yet early as it was or, as it should be said, perhaps, far advanced as the night was, Sebastian had not yet sought his bed. Instead, he seemed to have decided on taking whatever rest he might require in the great saloon in which he seemed to pass the principal part of his time when at home. He was asleep now in the large Singapore chair he always sat in--it being inside the room at this time instead of outside on the veranda--possibly for fear of any night dews that--even in this climate--will sometimes arise; he being near the table on which was the never-failing bottle of Bourbon whisky. "The young man's companion," as Sebastian had more than once hilariously termed it.

But that was not the only bottle, the only liquid, on the table by his side.

For there stood also by Sebastian's hand a stumpy, neckless bottle which looked as if it might once have been part of the stock-in-trade of some chemist's shop--a bottle which was half full of a liquid of the faintest amber or hay-colour. And, to his astonishment, he likewise saw standing on the table a small retort, a thing he had never supposed was likely to be known to Sebastian.

"Well!" he thought to himself as he moved slowly along the balcony to the open door, not being desirous of waking the sleeping man, "you are indeed a strange man, if 'strange' is the word to apply to you. I wonder what you are dabbling in chemistry for now? Probably no good!"

## CHAPTER XXI.

### **JULIAN FEELS STRANGE**

A fortnight had elapsed, it has been written, since the meeting between Beatrix and Julian on the palm-clad knoll, and during that time the latter had found himself left very much to his own resources by Sebastian. Indeed, Julian was never quite able to make out what became of his "relative" during the day, although at night, when they sat as usual on the veranda, Sebastian generally explained matters by saying that he had been absent at one place or another on business, the "business" consisting of trafficking with other settlers for the sale or purchase of the productions of the various estates. As, however, few people ever came to Desolada, and none as "visitors" in the ordinary sense of the word, Julian had no opportunity of discovering by outside conversation whether the other's statements were accurate or not. Still, as he said to himself, Sebastian's pursuits were no concern whatever of his, and at any rate the latter's absence left him free to do whatever he chose with his own time. To shoot curassows, wild turkeys, and sometimes monkeys, or, at least, to appear to go out shooting them; though, as often as not, the expedition ended at All Pines, to which place Julian made his way every other day to post a letter to Beatrix.

Now, after a fortnight had been spent in this manner, during the whole of which period he had not set his eyes on Madame Carmaux, who still kept her room and was reported to be suffering from a bilious fever, the two men sat upon the veranda of the lower floor after the evening meal had been concluded, both of them having their pipes in their mouths. While, close to Sebastian's hand, was a large tumbler which contained a very good modicum of Bourbon whisky, slightly dashed with water.

"You don't drink at all now," that gentleman said to his cousin, as he always called him. "Don't

you like the stuff, or what? If that's what it is, I can get something else, you know, from Belize."

"No," Julian replied, "that is not what it is. But of late, for a week or so now, I have not been feeling well, and perhaps abstinence from that is the best thing," and he nodded his head towards where the Bourbon whisky bottle stood.

"I told you so," Sebastian exclaimed; "only you wouldn't believe me. You were sure to feel seedy sooner or later. Every one does at first, when they come to this precious colony."

"I ought to be pretty well climate-hardened all the same," Julian remarked, "after the places I've been in. Burmah isn't considered quite the sweetest thing in the way of health resorts, yet I got through that all right."

"I hope you are not going to have a fever or anything wrong with your liver. Those are the things people suffer from here, intermittent and remittent fevers especially. I must give you some medicine."

"No, thanks," Julian replied; "I think I can do very well without it at present. Besides, the time has come for me to bring my visit to a close, you know. You have been very kind and hospitable, but there is such a thing as overstaying one's welcome."

To his momentary astonishment, since he quite expected that Sebastian was looking forward to his departure with considerable eagerness and was extremely desirous of seeing the last of him, this announcement was not received at all as he expected. In actual truth, Julian had imagined that his decision would be accepted with the faintest of protests which a host could make, while, instead, he perceived that Sebastian was absolutely overcome with something that, if not dismay, was very like it. His face fell, as the light of the lamp (round which countless moths buzzed and circled in the sickly night air) testified plainly, and he uttered an exclamation that was one of unfeigned disappointment, if not regret.

"Oh!" he said, "but I can't allow that. I can't, indeed. Going away because you feel queer. Nonsense, man! You'll be all right in a day or so. And to go away after a visit of two or three weeks only! Why! when people come such a journey as you have done from England to here, we expect them to stop six months."

"That in any case would be impossible. My leave of absence only covers that space of time, and cannot be exceeded. But," Julian continued, "don't think, all the same, that I am afraid of fever or anything of that sort. That wouldn't frighten me away."

"I can't see what you came for, then. What the deuce," he said, speaking roughly now as though his temper was rising, "could have brought you to Honduras if you weren't going to stay above a month in the place?"

"I wanted to see the place where my father lived," the other replied, and as he did so he watched Sebastian's features carefully. For although, of course, he was supposed to be the son of George Ritherdon who had lived at Desolada once, he thought it most probable that this remark might cause his cousin some disturbance.

Whether it did so or not, he could, however, scarcely tell, since, as he made it, Sebastian, who was relighting his pipe with a match, let the latter fall, and instantly leant forward to pick it up again.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, when he had done so, "of course, if you only wanted to do that, two or three weeks are long enough. Yet, I must say, I think it is an uncommon short stay. However, I suppose even now you don't mean to go off in a wonderful hurry?"

"To-day," said Julian, "is Wednesday. Suppose, as you are so kind, that we fix next Monday for my departure."

"Next Monday. Next Monday," and by the movement of Sebastian's lips, the other could see that he was making some kind of calculation. "Next Monday. Four clear days. Ah!" and his face brightened very much as he spoke. "Well! that's something, isn't it? Four clear days."

Upstairs, when Julian had reached his room, he found himself meditating upon why Sebastian should have seemed so undoubtedly pleased at the knowledge that he was going to stay for another "four clear days."

"We haven't seen such a wonderful lot of each other," he reflected, "except for an hour or so after supper; and as I have spent my time uselessly in mooning about this place and the neighbourhood, he can't suppose that it's very lively for me. Especially as--as there have been risks."

"As--as--as there have been--risks," he repeated a few moments afterwards. Then, while still he sat on in his chair, gazing, as he recognised, vaguely out of the window, he noticed that his mind seemed to have got into a dull, sodden state--that it was not active.

"As--there--have--been risks," he repeated once more. And now he pushed his chair on one side

as he rose from it, exclaiming:

"This won't do. There's something wrong with me. As--there--have--no!--no! I don't want to keep on repeating this phrase over and over again. What is the matter with me? *Have* I got a fever?"

Thinking this, though as he did so he recognised that his head was by no means clear and that he felt dull and heavy, as a man might do who had not slept for some nights, he thought, too, that it would be best for him to go to bed. Doubtless his liver was affected by the climate; doubtless, also, he would be well enough in the morning.

"There is," he said to himself, "a chemist's in the village of All Pines--I will let him to give me a draught in the morning. I wonder if Zara ever takes a draught--I--I--mean Beatrix. What rot I am talking!" he murmured to himself, "and now, to add to other things the lamp is going out."

Whereon he made a step towards where the lamp stood on the table, and turning up the wicks gently saw that, in a moment, the flames were leaping up the glass chimney and blackening it.

"I thought it was going out," he said to himself, turning the wicks down again rapidly; "I seem to be getting blind too. There is no doubt that I have got a fever. Let me see."

As he spoke he put his hand into his trousers pocket to draw out his keys, it being his intention to open his Gladstone bag and get out a little medicine casket he always carried with him when out of England, and especially when in tropical places; and, in doing so, he leant his head a little to the side that the pocket was on, his chin drooping somewhat towards the lapel of his white jacket.

"I suppose," he muttered, "that my sense of smell's affected too, now. Or else--jacket's getting--some beastly old--old--old tropical smell that clings to everything--in--in such countries. Never mind. Here's keys."

He drew them forth, regarding the bunch with a stare as though it was something he was unacquainted with, and then, instead of putting into the lock of the bag the long slim key which is usual, he endeavoured to insert a large one that really belonged to a trunk he had left behind at the shipping office in Belize as not being wanted.

Reflection served, however, to call to his mind that this key was not very likely to open the bag, and at last, after giving an inane smile at the mistake, he succeeded in his endeavour and was able to get out the contents, and to withdraw the little medicine casket.

"Quinine," he said, spelling the word letter by letter as he held the phial under the lamp. "Quinine. That's it. Don't let's make a mistake. Q-u-i-n-i-n-e. That's all right. Can't go wrong now."

By the aid of the contents of the water-bottle and his glass he was enabled to swallow two quinine pills of two grains each, and then he resolved--in a hazy, uncertain kind of way--to go to bed. Whereon, slowly he divested himself of his clothes and, in a mechanical manner, threw back the mosquito curtains. But, whatever might be the matter with him, and however clouded his intellect might be, he was not yet so dense as to forget the strange occupant of that bed which he had once before discovered there.

"Beatrix said," he muttered, "that coral snake kills in an hour. I don't want to die in an hour. Let's see if we've got another guest here to-night."

And, as he had done every night since he had returned to Desolada, he thoroughly explored the bed, doing so, however, on this occasion in a lethargic, heavy manner which caused him to be some considerable time about it.

"Turn to the left to unscrew," he said to himself, recalling some old schoolboy phrase as he stood now by the lamp ready to extinguish it, "to the right to screw. Same, I suppose, to turn up and down. Oh! the revolver. Where's that? May as well have it handy." Whereupon he went over to where he had hung up his jacket and removed the weapon from the inside pocket.

"A nasty smell these tropical places have," he muttered as he did so. "There's the smell of India--no one ever forgets that--and also the smell of Africa. Well! strikes me Honduras can go one better than either of them."

Then he got into bed.

Dizzy, stupefied as he felt, however, it did not seem as if his stupefaction or semi-delirium, or whatever it was which had overcome him, was likely to plunge him into a heavy, dull sleep. Instead, he found himself lying there with his eyes wide open, and, although his brain felt like a lump of lead, while there was a weight at his forehead as if something were pressing on it, he was conscious that one of his senses was very acute--namely, the sense of smell. Either that, or else some very peculiar phase in the fever which he was experiencing, was causing a strange sense of disgust in his nostrils.

"This bed smells just like a temple I went into in Burmah once," he thought to himself. "What



the deuce is the matter with me--or it? Anyhow, I can't stand it." And, determined not to endure the unpleasantness any longer, he got up from the bed, while wrapping himself in the dark coverlet he went over to an old rickety sofa that ran along the opposite side of the room and lay down upon it.

And here, at least, the odour was not apparent. The old horsehair bolster and pillow did emit, it is true, the peculiar stuffy flavour which such things will do even in temperate climates; but beyond that nothing else. The acrid, loathsome odour which he had smelt for the first time when he leant his head slightly as he felt for his keys, and which he had perceived in a far more intensified form when he lay down in the bed, was not at all apparent now. It seemed as if he was, at last, likely to fall asleep.

## **CHAPTER XXII.**

### **IN THE DARK**

Julian supposed when he was awakened later on, and felt that he was drenched with a warm perspiration which caused his light tropical clothes to stick to him with a hot clammy feeling, that he must have slept for two hours. For now, as he lay on the sofa facing the window, he could see through the slats of the persianas, which he had forgotten to turn down, that, peeping round the window-frame there came an edge of the moon, which he seemed to recollect--dimly, hazily, and indistinctly--had risen late last night.

And that moon--which stole more and more into his view as he regarded it--was casting now a long ray into the bedroom, so that there came across the floor a streak of light of about the breadth of nine inches.

Yet--once his bemused brain had grasped the fact that this ray was there, while, at the same time, that brain was still clear enough to comprehend that every moment the flood of light was becoming larger, so that soon the apartment would be filled with it--he paid no further attention to the matter, nor to the distant rumbling of thunder far away--thunder that told of a tropical storm taking place at a distance. Instead, he was endeavouring to argue silently with himself as to the actual state in which his mind was; as to whether he was in a dreamy kind of delirium, or whether, in spite of any fever that might be upon him, he was still able to distinctly understand his surroundings.

If, as he hoped earnestly, the latter was the case; if he was not delirious, but only numbed by some ailment that had insidiously taken possession of him--then--why then--surely! he was in deadly peril of some immediate attack upon him--upon his life perhaps.

For, outside those persianas there was another light, two other lights glittering in upon him that were not cast by the moon, but that (because now and again her rays were thrown upon them) he discovered to be a pair of eyes. And not the eyes of an animal either, since they glisten in the dark, but, instead, human eyes that glared horribly as now and again the moonbeams caught them.

Only! was it the truth that they were real tangible eyes, or were they but a fantasy of a mind unhinged by fever?

He must know that! And he could only do so by lying perfectly still; by watching.

Those eyes which stared in at him now were low down to the floor of the balcony, even as he seemed to recollect Zara's eyes had been on one occasion during her nocturnal visits to him when he first arrived at Desolada; yet now he knew, felt sure, that they were not Zara's. Why he felt so sure he could not tell, nor in the feverish languor that was upon him, could he even reason with himself as why he did feel so sure. But, at the same time, he told himself, they were not hers. Of that he was certain.

How did they come there, low down--not a foot above the floor of the veranda? Could they indeed be the eyes of an animal in spite of the white eyeballs on which the rays shone with such a sickly gleam; did they belong to some household dog which had chosen this spot for its night's repose? Yet--yet--if such was the case, why did it not sleep curled up or stretched out, instead of peering through the latticework with its eyes close to the slats, as though determined to see all that was in the room and all that was going on in it. No! it could not be that, while, also it was not what he had deemed it might be a few minutes ago--the eyes of a snake. It was impossible, since the eyes of a snake would have been much closer together.

They were--there could be no doubt about it! the eyes of a human being, man or woman. And they were not Zara's. He was sure of that.

But still they glared into the room, glared through the dusky sombreness of the lower part of it, of that part of the floor which, even now, the moonlight was not illuminating. And then to his astonishment he saw, as the light flooded the apartment more and more, that those eyes were staring not at him but towards another portion of the room; towards where the bed stood enveloped in the long hanging folds of the mosquito curtains, which, to his distempered mind, seemed in the weird light of the tropical night to look like the hangings that enshroud a catafalque--a funeral canopy.

His hand, shaky though he knew it was from whatever ailed him, was on his revolver; for a moment or so he lay there asking himself if he should fire at that wizard thing, that creepy mystery outside his room; if he should aim fair between those glistening eyeballs and trust to fortune to kill or disable the mysterious watcher? But still, however, he refrained; for, if his senses were still in his own possession, if his mind was still able to understand anything, it understood that near the bed in which he should have been sleeping had it not been for the evil odours exhaled from it to-night, there was something that might be a more fitting object of his discharge than the creature outside.

"If," he thought to himself, "I am neither mad nor delirious nor drenched with fever, those eyes are watching something in this room, and that something is not myself."

Should he turn his head; could he turn it towards that dark patch behind the mosquito curtains which was not illuminated with the moon's rays? Could he do it as a man turns in his sleep--restlessly--so that in the action there might be nothing which should alarm whatever lurked in the darkness over there; the thing that, having got into his room in the night full of evil intentions towards him, was now itself being watched, suspected, perhaps trapped. Could he do it?

As he meditated thus, feeling sure now that his stupor, his density of mind, was not what it had been--recognising with a feeling of devout thankfulness that, whatever his state might hitherto have been, his mind was now becoming clear and his intellect collected, he prepared to put this determination into practise. He would roll over on to his right side, as he had seen sleepy sailors roll over on to theirs in the watch below; he would roll over too, with his hand securely on the butt of his revolver. And then--if--if, as he felt certain was the case, there was some dark skulking thing hiding behind his bedhead, if he should see another pair of eyes gleaming out in the rays of the moon--why, then, woe befall it! He had had enough of these midnight hauntings from one visitant or another in this house of mystery; he would fire straight at that figure, he would kill it dead, if so it must be, even if it were Sebastian himself.

As he turned, imitating a sleeper's restlessness, as well as he was able, there came two interruptions--interruptions that stayed his hand.

From near the bed--he was right! those eyes outside had been watching something that was inside there!--close to him, across the room, he heard a sound. A sound that was half a one, half an inward catching of the breath, a gasp. Yet so low, so quickly suppressed, that none who had not suspected, none who had not been on the watch for the slightest sign, would have heard or noticed it. But he had heard it!

The other was a noisier, a more palpable interruption. Sebastian, below in the great saloon on the front was singing to himself, loudly and boisterously, and then, equally boisterously, was wishing Madame Carmaux "Good-night." Answering evidently, too, some question, which Julian could not hear put to him by her, and expressing also the hope that she would feel better soon.

"Yet," thought Julian, "she cannot quit her room. It is strange. Strange, too, that she should be up so late. It must be two o'clock, at least."

With a glance from his eye towards the lower part of the window, which still he could see from the position in which he lay, he observed that the mysterious watcher outside was gone. Those eyes, at least, no longer gleamed from low down by the floor; through the slats of the blind he perceived that the spot where they had lately been was now a void. The watcher was gone! But what of the one who had been watched, of the lurking creature that was near his bed, and that had gasped with fear even as he turned over on the sofa? What of that? Well, it was still there. He was alone with it.

His thumb drew back the trigger of the revolver, the well-known click was heard--the click which can never be disguised or silenced. A click that many a man has listened to with mortal agony and terror of soul, knowing that it sounds his knell. Then again on his ears there fell that gasp, that indrawn catching of the breath, which told of a terrified object close by his side.

And it could not be Sebastian who had uttered it; Sebastian, the one person alone who had reason to meditate the worst towards him that one human being can desire for another. It could not be he. For was he not still singing boisterously below in the front of the house? It could not be he. And, Julian reflected, he was about to take a life, the life of some one whom he himself did not know, of some one whose presence in his room even at night, at such an hour of the night, might

yet be capable of explanation; that might not, in absolute fact, bode evil to him. Suppose, that after all, it should be Zara, and that again she was there for some purpose of serving his interest as he had told Beatrix he believed she had been more than once before. Suppose that, and that now he should fire and kill her! How would he feel then! What would his remorse be?

No! He would not do it.

Instead, therefore, he whispered the words, "Zara, what is it?"

Even as he did so, even as he spoke, he noticed that a change had come over the room. It was quite dark now; the moon's rays no longer gleamed in; the moon itself was gone, obscured. What had happened? In a moment the question was answered.

Upon the balcony outside there came a rattle as though a deluge of small stones had been hurled down upon it, and he, who knew well what the violence of tropical storms is, recognized that one had broken over Desolada, and that the rain, if not hail, was descending in a deluge. A moment later there came, too, a flash of purple, gleaming lightning which was gone before he could turn his eyes into the quarter of the room where lurked the thing that he suspected, felt sure was there. Then, over all, there burst the roar of the thunder from above, reverberating, pealing all around, rumbling, and reechoing a moment later in the Cockscomb Mountains.

"Zara!" he called louder now, so as to make himself heard above the din of the storm--"Zara, why do you not answer me? I mean you no harm."

But, if amid this tumult any answer was given, he did not hear it. For now the crash of the thunder, the downpour of the rain, the screaming of the parrots, and the demoniacal howlings of the baboons farther away, served to create such a turmoil that scarcely could the cry of a human voice be heard above it all.

"I am determined," Julian exclaimed, "to know who and what it is that cowers there!" Wherewith he sprang from off the sofa on which he had previously raised himself to a sitting position, and, with a leap, rushed towards the mosquito curtains hanging by the bedhead. "I will see who and what you are!" he cried, feeling certain that in this spot was still lurking some strange, secret visitant.

Yet to his astonishment the spot was empty when he reached it. Neither human being nor animal, nor anything whatever, was there.

"I am indeed struck with fever and delirious," he muttered to himself, "or if not that, am mad. Yet I could have sworn it was as I thought."

Then again, as he stood there holding in his hand the gauzy curtains which he had brushed aside, the storm burst afresh over the house with renewed violence; again the sheets of rain poured down; once more the purple tropical lightning flashed and the thunder roared. And as the tempest beat down on all beneath its violence, and while a moment of intense darkness was followed by an instant of brilliant light, Julian heard a stronger rattle of the Venetian blinds than the wind had made, and saw, as again there came a flash of lightning, a dark, hooded figure creep out swiftly past them on to the balcony--a figure shrouded to the eyes, yet in the dark eyes of which, as the lightning played on them, there seemed to be a look of awful fear.

## **CHAPTER XXIII.**

### **WARNED**

Blue as the deepest gleam within the sapphire's depth were the heavens; bright as molten gold were the sun's rays the next morning when the storm was past--leaving, however, in its track some marks of its passage. For the flowers in the gardens round the house were beaten down now with the weight of water that had fallen on them; beneath the oleanders and the flamboyants, the allamandas and ixoras, the blossoms strewed the pampas grass in masses; while many crabs--which wander up from the seacoast in search of succulent plants whereon to feed--lay dead near the roots of the bushes and shrubs.

Yet a day's scorching sun, to be followed perhaps by an entire absence of further rain for a month, would soon cause fresh masses of bloom to take the place of those which were destroyed, especially as now they had received the moisture so necessary to their existence. And Julian, standing on his balcony and wondering who that strange nocturnal visitor was who had fled on to this very balcony a few hours before, thought that during his stay in this mysterious place he had

never seen its surroundings look so fair.

Whether it was that he had received considerable benefit from the quinine which he had taken overnight, or whether it was from the total change of clothing which he had now assumed in place of the garments he had worn up to now, or perhaps from his not having lain through the night upon the bed which, particularly of late, had seemed so malodorous, he felt very much better this morning. His brain no longer appeared numbed nor his mind hazy, nor had he any headache.

"Which," he said to himself, "is a mighty good thing. For now I want all my wits about me. This affair has got to be brought to a conclusion somehow, and Julian Ritherdon is the man to do it. Only," he said, with now a smile on his face--"only, no more of the simple trusting individual you have been, my friend--if you ever have been such! Instead of suspecting Master Sebastian of being in the wrong box you have got to prove him so, and instead of suspecting him to be a--well! say a gentleman who hasn't got much regard for you, you have got to get to windward of him. Now go full speed ahead, my son."

Whereon, to commence the process of getting to windward of Sebastian and also of carrying out the movement known in his profession as going "full speed ahead," he informed the nigger who brought him his shaving-water that he felt very poorly indeed, and would, with Sebastian's permission, remain in his room that day.

"Because," he said to himself, "I think it would be as well if I kept a kind of watch upon this tastefully furnished apartment. Like all the rest of this house, it is becoming what the conjurers call 'a home of mystery,' and is consequently getting more and more interesting. And there are only the 'four clear days' left wherein the mystery can be solved--if ever."

A few moments after he had made these reflections he heard a tap at his bedroom door, and on bidding the person who was outside to come in, Sebastian made his appearance, there being on his face a look of regret at the information which he said the negro had just conveyed to him.

"I say, old fellow, this is bad news. It won't do at all. Not at all. What is the matter with you?" he exclaimed in his usual bluff, hearty way.

"A touch of fever, I'm afraid," Julian replied. "Not much, I fancy, but still worth being careful about. I'll keep my room to-day if you don't mind."

"Mind!" Sebastian exclaimed. "Mind; why, my dear Julian, that's the very best thing you can do, the very thing you ought to do. And I'll send you something appetizing by Zara. Let me see. They have brought in this morning some of that mountain mullet you liked so much; that will do first-rate for breakfast with some Guava jelly. How will that suit?"

"Nothing could be better. Those mountain mullet are superb. You are very good."

"Oh! that's nothing. And, look here, I have brought you a little phial of our physic-nut oil, which the natives say will cure anything, and almost bring a dead man back to life. Take three or four drops of that, my boy, in your coffee, and you'll feel a new man," whereon he drew a little phial from his pocket and stood it on the table. Then, after a few more sympathetic remarks he prepared to depart, saying he would have the breakfast prepared and sent up by Zara at once.

"I was glad," Julian said casually, as Sebastian approached the door, "to hear you wishing Madame Carmaux good-night, last night. I didn't know she was well enough to get downstairs yet."

"Oh! yes," the other replied in a more or less careless tone, "she came down to supper last night and sat up late with me. I was glad of her company, you know. So you heard us, eh? Did you hear us singing, too? We got quite inspirited over her return to health. If you'd only been down, my boy, we would have had a rollicking time of it."

"Never mind," said Julian, "better luck next time. You wait till I do come down and we'll have a regular chorus. When I give you some of my wardroom songs, you'll be surprised."

"Right," said Sebastian, with a laugh; "the sooner the better," whereon he took himself off.

"I didn't hear the silvery tones of Madame Carmaux, all the same," Julian thought to himself after the other was gone, "neither do I remember that I heard her return his 'good-night.' However, Sebastian's own tones are somewhat stentorian when he lets himself go, or as our Irish doctor used to say of the bo'sun's, 'enough to split a pitcher,' so I suppose that isn't very strange."

He took down his jacket now, and indeed the whole of his white drill suit which he had discarded for an exactly similar one that he had in his large Gladstone bag, and began to roll it up preparatory to packing it away. Though, as he did so, he again perceived the horrible fœtid odour which it had emitted overnight--the same odour that had also been so perceptible when he had laid his head upon the pillow. The revolting smell that had driven him from the bed to seek repose on that sofa.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, "it is loathsome. Even now, with the room full of the fresh morning air,

I feel as if I were getting giddy and bemused again." Whereon, and while uttering some remarks that were by no means complimentary to Honduras and some of its perfumes, he began rolling the clothes up as quickly as he could. Yet while he did so, being now engaged with the jacket, his eye was attracted by the lapel of the collar, the white surface of which was discoloured--though only in the faintest degree discoloured--a yellowish, grey colour. Each lapel, down to where the topmost button was! Then, after a close inspection of the jacket all over, he perceived that nowhere else was it similarly stained.

His curiosity becoming excited by this, since in no way could he account for such a thing (he distinctly remembered that there had been no stain, however faint, on the lapel before), he regarded the waistcoat next; and there, on the small lapel of that--both left and right--were the same marks.

"Strange," he muttered, "strange. Very strange. One might say that the washerwoman had spilt something on coat and waistcoat--purposely. Something, too, that smells uncommonly nasty."

For, by inspection, or rather test with his nostrils, he was easily able to perceive that no other part of his discarded clothing emitted any such disagreeable odour. While, too, as he applied his nose again and again to the faint stains, he also perceived that in his brain there came once more the giddiness and haziness from which he had suffered so much last night--as well as the feeling of stupid density amounting almost to dreaminess or delirium.

"If that stuff was under my nose all day long yesterday, and perhaps for a week or so before," he reflected, "I don't wonder that at last I became almost wandering in my mind, as well as stupefied." Then, a thought striking him, he went over to the pillow on the bed and gazed down on it. And there, upon it, on either side, was the same stain--faint, yellow, and emitting the same acrid, loathsome odour.

"So, so," he said to himself, "I begin to understand. I begin to understand very well, and to comprehend Sebastian's chemical experiments. The woman who washed my jacket and waistcoat in England is not the same woman who washed that pillow-case in British Honduras. Yet the same stain and the same odour are on both. All right! A good deal may happen in the next four days."

Then, as he thus meditated, he opened the little phial of physic-nut oil, which Sebastian had thoughtfully brought him and left behind with injunctions that he should take three or four drops of it in his coffee, and smelt it. After which he said, "Certainly, I won't fail to do so. All right, Sebastian, it's full speed ahead now!"

A little later, Zara arrived bearing in her hands a large tray on which were all the necessaries for a breakfast that would have satisfied a hungry man, let alone an "invalid." There were, of course, innumerable other servants about this vast house, but Zara always seemed to perform the principal duties of waiting upon those who constituted the superiors, and in many cases to issue orders to the others, in much such a way as a butler in England issues orders to his underlings.

Now, having deposited the tray upon the table, which she cleared for the purpose, she uncovered the largest dish and submitted to Julian's gaze a good-sized trout reposing in it and looking extremely appetizing.

"But," said Julian, as he regarded the fish, "that isn't what Sebastian promised me. He said he would send one of those delicious mountain mullet we had the other night."

For a moment the half-caste girl's lustrous eyes dwelt almost meditatively, as it seemed, on him; then she said, "There are none. The men have not caught any for a long time."

"But Mr. Ritherdon said there were. That the men----"

"He was wrong," she interrupted, her eyes roaming all round the room, while it seemed almost to Julian as though, particularly, they sought the spot where the pillow was. "He was wrong. You eat that," looking at the dish. "That will do you no--will do you good."

And it appeared to Julian, now thoroughly on the *qui vive* as to everything that went on around him as well as to every word that was uttered, as though she emphasized the word "that."

"I'm glad to hear Madame Carmaux is so much better," he said, conversationally, as she finished arranging the breakfast before him and poured out his coffee. "They were pretty gay below last night."

"Below last night," she repeated, her eyes full on him. "Below last night. Were they? Did you hear her below last night?"

"Didn't you?"

"I was not there," she answered; "I was nursing a sick woman in the plantation."

"Oh! You didn't pass your evening on the balcony, then, as you have sometimes done?"

"No," she said, and still her eyes gazed so intently into his that he wondered what was going on in her mind.

"No." Then, suddenly, she asked, "When are you going away?"

"That is not polite, Zara. One never asks a guest----"

"Why," she interrupted, speaking almost savagely and showing her small white teeth, as though with an access of sudden temper--"why do you turn everything into a--a--*chanza*--a joke. Are you a fo--a madman?"

"Really, Zara!" Then, seeing that the girl was contending with some inward turbulence of spirit which seemed almost likely to end in an outbreak, Julian said quietly, seriously, "No, Zara, I am neither a fool nor a madman. Look here, I believe you are a good, honest, straightforward girl. Therefore, I will be plain with you. I have told Mr. Ritherdon that I am going on Monday. In four days----"

"Go at once!" she interrupted again. "At once. Get news from Belize, somehow, that calls you away. Leave Desolada. Begone!" she continued in her quaint, stilted English, which she spoke well enough except when obliged to use either a Spanish or Carib word. "Begone!" And as she said this it seemed almost to Julian that, with those dark gleaming eyes of hers, she was endeavouring to convey some intelligence to him which she would not put into words.

"That," he said, referring to her last sentence, "is what I am thinking about doing. Only, even then, I shall not have done with Desolada and its inhabitants. There is more for me to do yet, Zara."

## **CHAPTER XXIV.**

### **JULIAN'S EYES ARE OPENED**

Julian's slumbers of the past night having been more or less disturbed by the various incidents of, first, his drowsy delirium, then of those figures of the watcher and the watched, as well as by the storm and the sight of the departing form of the latter individual, he decided that, during the course of the present day, he would endeavour to obtain some sleep. Especially he determined thus because, now, he knew that there must be no more sleeping at night for him.

Whether he remained in Desolada for the next four nights as he had consented to do, or whether he decided to follow Zara's suggestion and find some excuse for departing at once, he understood plainly that to sleep again when night was over all the house might be fraught with deadly risk to him. What that risk was, what the tangible shape which it would be likely later on to assume, he was not yet able to conclude--but that it existed he had no doubt. Bright and *insouciant* as he was, with also in his composition a total absence of fear, he was still sufficiently cool, as well as sufficiently intelligent to understand that here, in Desolada, he was not only regarded as an inconvenient interloper, but one who must be got rid of somehow.

"Which proves, if it proves anything," he thought, "that Sebastian knows all about why I am in this country; and also that, secure as his position seems, there is some flaw in it which, if brought to light, will destroy that position. I know it, too, now, am certain that George Ritherdon's story is true--and, somehow, I am going to prove it so. I have muddled the time away too long; now I am going to be a man of action. When I get back to Belize that action begins. Mr. Spranger said I ought to confide in a lawyer, and in a lawyer I will confide. Henceforth, we'll thresh this thing out thoroughly."

Zara had come in again and removed the remnants of the breakfast, and as he had told her that he meant to sleep as long as ever it was possible, she had promised him that he should not be disturbed. Wherefore, he now proceeded to darken the room in every way that he could, without thoroughly excluding the air; namely, by letting down the curtains of the windows as well as by closing the persianas.

"I suppose," he thought to himself, "there is no likelihood of my visitor coming in, in the broad daylight, yet, all the same, I will endeavour to make sure." Upon which he proceeded to put in practise an old trick which in his gunroom days he had often played upon his brother middies (and had had played upon himself); while remembering, as he did so, the merry shouts which had run along the gangway of the lower deck on dark nights over its successful accomplishment. He took a piece of stout cord and tied it across from one side of the window to the other at about a foot and a half from the floor.

"Now," he said, "If any one tries to come in here to-day--well! if they don't break their legs they'll make such a din as will lead to their falling into my hands."

It was almost midday when he laid himself down on the sofa to obtain his much needed rest--midday, and with the sun streaming down vertically and making the apartment, in spite of its being darkened, more like the engine room of a steamer than anything else; yet, soon, he was in a deep refreshing sleep in spite of this disadvantage. A slumber so calm and refreshing that he slept on and on, until, at last, the room grew cool; partly by aid of a gentle breeze which was now blowing down from the summits of the Cockscomb Mountains and partly by the coming of the swift tropical darkness.

Then he awoke, not knowing where he was nor being able to recall that fact even for a moment or so after he was awake, nor to understand why he lay there in the dark. Yet, as gradually he returned to his every-day senses, he became aware that he did not alone owe his awakening to the fact that he had exhausted his desire for slumber, but also to a sound which fell upon his ears. The sound of a slight tapping on his bedroom door.

Astonished at the darkness, which now enveloped the room, more than at anything else--for the tapping he attributed to Zara having brought him his evening meal--he went to the door and turned the key, he having been careful to lock the former securely before going to sleep.

Then, to his surprise, when he had opened the door and peered into the passage, which was also now enveloped in the shadow of night, he saw a figure standing there which was not that of Zara, but, instead, of the half-caste Paz.

"What is it?" he asked, staring at the man and wondering what he wanted. "What! Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing very much," the half-caste answered, his eyes having a strange glitter in them as they rested on Julian's face. "Only, think you like to see funny sight. You like see Señor Sebastian look very funny. You come with me. Quietly."

"What do you mean, Paz?" Julian asked, wondering if this was some ruse whereby to beguile him into danger. "What is it?"

"I show you Massa Sebastian very funny. He very strange. Don't think he find mountain mullet very good for him; don't think he like drink very much with physic-nut oil in it," and he gave that little bleating laugh which Julian had heard before and marvelled at.

Mountain mullet! Physic-nut oil! The very things that Sebastian had suggested to Julian that morning, yet of which Julian had not partaken. The mullet, although Zara had said the men had not caught any for a long time. The phial which he had brought to the room, but the oil of which he had not touched!

"There was no mountain mullet caught--" he began, but Paz interrupted him with that bleating laugh once more, though subdued as befitted the circumstances.

"Ho!" he said. "Nice mountain mullet in Desolada this morning. He order it cook for you. Only--Zara good girl. She love Sebastian, so she give it him and give you trout. Very good girl. But--it make him funny. So, too, physic-nut oil. But that wrong name. Physic-nut oil very much. Not good if mixed with drop of Amancay."

Amancay! Where had Julian heard that name before! Then, swift as lightning, he remembered. He recalled a conversation he had had with Mr. Spranger one evening over the various plants and herbs of the colony, and also how he had listened to stories of the deadly powers of many of them--of the Manzanillo, or Manchineel, of the Florispondio and the Cojon del gato--above all, of the Amancay, a plant whose juice caused first delirium; then, if taken continually, raving madness, and then--death. A plant, too, whose juice could work its deadly destruction not only by being taken inwardly, but by being inhaled.

"The Indians," Mr. Spranger had said, "content themselves with that. If they can only get the opportunity of sprinkling it on the earth where their enemy lies, or of smearing his tent canvas with it, or his clothes, the trick is done. And that enemy's only chance is that he, too, should know of its properties. Then he is safe. For the odour it emits is such that none who have ever smelt it once can fail to recognise its presence. But on those who are unacquainted with those properties--well! God help them!"

He wondered as he recalled those words if he had turned white, so white that, even in the dusk of the corridor, the man standing by his side could perceive it; he wondered, too, if his features had assumed a stern, set expression in keeping with the determination that now was dominant in his mind. The determination to descend to where Sebastian Ritherdon was, to stand face to face with him, to ask him whether it was he who had sprinkled his jacket and his waistcoat, as well as the pillow on which he nightly slept, with the accursed, infernal juice of the deadly Amancay. Ask! Bah! what use to ask, only to receive a lie in return! What need at all to ask? *He knew!*

"Come," he said to Paz, even as he went back into the room for his revolver. "Come, take me to

where this fellow is. Yet," he said pausing, "you say I shall see a funny sight. What is it? Is he mad--or dying?"

"He funny. He eat mountain mullet, he drink physic-nut oil in wine. Zara love him dearly, he----"

"Come," Julian again said, speaking sternly. "Come."

Then they both went along the corridor and down the great staircase.

"Let us go out garden, to veranda," Paz whispered. "Then we look in over veranda through open window. See funny things. Hear funny words." Whereupon accompanied by Julian, he went out by a side door of the long hall, and so came around into the garden in front of the great saloon in which Sebastian always sat in the evening.

Sheltering themselves behind a vast bush of flamboyants which grew close up to where the veranda ran, they were both able to see into the room, when in truth the sight of Sebastian was enough to make the beholders deem him mad.

His coat was off, flung across the back of the chair, but in his hand he had a large white pocket handkerchief with which he incessantly wiped his face, down which the perspiration was pouring. Yet, even as he did so, it was plain to observe that he was seeking eagerly for something which he could not find. A large campeachy-wood cabinet stood up against the wall exactly facing the spot where the window was, and the doors of this were now set open, showing all the drawers dragged out of their places and the contents turned out pell-mell. While the man, lurching unsteadily all the time and with a stumbling, heavy motion in his feet which seemed familiar enough to Julian (since only last night he had stumbled and lurched in the same way), was seizing little bottles and phials and holding them up to the light, and wrenching the corks out of them to sniff at the contents, and then hurling them away from him with an action of despair and rage.

"He look for counter-poison," Paz said, using the Spanish expression, which Julian understood well enough. "Maybe, he not find it. Then he die," and the bleating laugh sounded now very much like a gloating chuckle. "Then he die," he repeated.

"Is there, then, an antidote?" Julian asked.

"Yes. Yes," Paz whispered. "Yes, antidoty, if he find it. If he has not taken too much."

"How can he have taken too much? Why take any?"

For answer Paz said nothing, but instead, looked at Julian. And, in the light that now streamed out across the veranda to where they stood, dimmed and shaded as it might be by the thick foliage and flower of the flamboyant bush, the latter could see that the half-caste's eyes glittered demoniacally and that his fingers were twitching, and judged that it was only by great constraint that the latter suppressed the laugh he indulged in so often.

Then, while no word was spoken between them, Julian felt the long slim fingers of Paz touch his and push something into his hand, something that he at once recognised to be the phial of physic-nut oil; or, rather, the phial that had once contained the physic-nut oil, diluted with the juice of the murderous Amancay.

"All love Sebastian here," the semi-savage hissed, his remaining white teeth shining horribly in the flickering gleam through the flamboyant. "Love him, oh! so dear."

"He find it. He find it," he muttered excitedly an instant afterwards. "Look! Look! Look!"

And Julian did look; fascinated by Sebastian's manner.

For the other held now a small bottle in his hand which he had unearthed from some drawer in the interior of the great cabinet, and was holding it between his eyes and the globe of the lamp, gazing as steadily as he could at the mixture which it doubtless contained. As steadily as he could, because he still swayed about a good deal while he stood there; perhaps because, too, his hands trembled. Then, with a look of exultation on his features and in his bloodshot eyes, plainly to be observed from where the two men stood outside, he tore the stopper out with his teeth, smelt the contents, and instantly seizing a tumbler emptied them into that, drenched it with water, and drank the draught down.

Yet, a moment later, Sebastian performed another action equally extraordinary--he seeming to remember--as they judged by the look of dawning recollection on his face--something he had forgotten! He came, still lurching, a little nearer to the open window, and then in a loud voice--a voice that was evidently intended to be heard at some distance--said:

"Well, good-night, Miriam. Good-night, I am so thankful to think that you are better! Good night."

And as he uttered those words, Julian understood.

"I see his ruse, his trick," he muttered. "He thinks that I am still upstairs, that he is deceiving



me, making me believe she is down here. But, though I am not up there, she is! And perhaps in my room again. Quick, Paz! Come. Follow me!"

## **CHAPTER XXV.**

### **A DÉNOUEMENT**

By the same way that they had descended they now mounted to the floor above. Only, it was not Julian's intention to re-enter his room in the same manner he had left it; namely, by the door opening out of the corridor. To do that would be useless, unavailing. If the woman whom he suspected was in that room now, the first sound of his footstep outside, be it never so light, would serve to put her on the alert, to cause her to flee out on to the balcony and away round the whole length of it, and, thereby, with her knowledge of all the entrances and exits of the house, to evade him.

That, he reflected, would not do. If she escaped him now, then the determination he had arrived at, to this night bring matters to a climax, would be thwarted. Some other way must be found.

"Take me on to the veranda," he whispered to Paz; "to where I shall be outside the room I occupy. This time I will be the watcher gazing in, not the person who is watched."

"I take you," Paz said. "I show you. Same way I get there last night."

"Last night! So! That was you outside, lying low down? It was you?"

But Paz only gave him now that look which he had given before, while he seemed at the same time to be struggling with that bleating laugh of his--the laugh which would surely have betrayed his presence.

"Come," he said, "I put you in big room of all. Old man Ritherdon call it guest room. Sebastian born there."

"Was he?" Julian asked in a whisper, "was he? Was he born there?"

"He born there. Come."

So, doubtless, the half-caste believed--since who in all Honduras disputed it! Who--except Julian himself, and, perhaps, the woman he loved; perhaps, too, her father.

Yet, the information that he was now being led to the room in which he felt sure that it was he who had been born and not the other, filled him with a kind of mystic, weird feeling as they crept along side by side towards it. For the first time since he had come to Desolada, he was about to visit the spot in which he had been given birth--the spot in which his mother had died; the spot wherein he had been stolen from that dying mother's side by his uncle.

Thinking thus, as they approached the door, he wondered, too, if by his presence in that room any inspiration would come to him as to how this other man had been made to supersede him, to appear as himself in the eyes of the little world in which he moved and lived. A man received as being what he was not, without question and with his claim undisputed.

"Go in," Paz whispered now, as he turned the handle. "Go in. From the window you see all that pass--if anything pass. Or you easy get on balcony. Your room there to right, hers there to left. If she go from one to other--then--you surely see."

"You will not accompany me?" Julian asked, wondering for the moment if there was treachery lurking in the man's determination to leave him at so critical a time; wondering, too, if, after all, he was about to warn the woman whom he, Julian, now sought to entrap in some nefarious midnight proceeding, of her danger. Yet, he argued with himself, that must be impossible. If he intended to do that, would he have divulged how Zara had changed one dish of food for another, so that he who set the trap had himself been caught in it; would he have given him so real a sign as to what use the phial had been put to as by placing it, empty, in his hands?

And, even though now Paz should meditate treachery--as, in truth, he did not believe he meditated it--still he cared nothing. What he had resolved to do he would do. What he had begun he would go on with. Now--at once--this very night!

"No. No," Paz said, in answer to his question. "No. I come not with you. I live not here but in plantation mile away. If I found here--he--he--try kill me. But you he will not kill. You big, strong, brave. And," the man continued in a whisper that was in truth a hiss, "it is you who must kill. Kill! Kill! Remember the snake in bed, the shot in wood, the mountain mullet, the Amancay. Now, I go. This is the room."

Then almost imperceptibly he was gone, his form disappearing like a black blur on the still darker, denser blackness of the corridor.

Without hesitation, Julian softly turned the handle and entered the room that gave egress to the balcony which he wished to gain. And although it was as dark as night itself, there was a something, a feeling of space, quite perceptible to his highly-strung senses, which told him that it was a vast chamber--a room suitable for the birth of the son and heir of the great house and its belongings.

"Strange," he thought to himself, "that thus I should revisit the place in which I first saw the light--that I, who in the darkness was spirited away, should, in the darkness, return to it."

Yet, black, impenetrable as all around was, there was an inferior density of darkness at the other end of the great room, away where the window was; and towards that he directed his footsteps, knowing that there, between the laths of the persianas which it possessed in common with every other room in the house, would be his opportunity. There was the coign of vantage through which he could keep watch and make observations.

"For," he thought, "if I see her going from her room to mine I shall know enough, as also I shall do if I see her returning from mine to hers. While, if she does neither, then it will be easy enough to discover whether she has been to that room or is in it still."

He was close by the window now, having felt his way carefully to it; he proceeded slowly so as to stumble against no obstacle nor make any noise; and then he knew that, should any form, however shrouded, pass before this window he could not fail to observe it. It was not so dark outside as to prevent that; also the gleam of the stars was considerable. And as Paz had done outside on the balcony last night, so he did now inside the room. He lowered himself noiselessly to the floor, kneeling on the soft carpet which this, the principal bedchamber possessed, while through a slat a foot from the ground, which he turned gently with his finger, he gazed out.

At first nothing occurred. All was as still, as silent as death; save for sometimes the bark of a distant dog, the chatter of an aroused bird in the palms near by, and the occasional midnight howl of a baboon farther away.

Wonderfully still it was; so undisturbed, indeed, except for those sounds, that almost a breath of air might have been heard.

Then, after half an hour, he heard a noise. The noise being a gentle one, but still perceptible, of the rattle of the persianas belonging to some window a little distance off. And to the left of him. Surely to the left of him!

"She is coming," he thought, holding his breath. "Coming. On her way to my room. To do what? What?"

But now the silence was again intense. Upon the boards of the veranda he could hear no footfall--Nothing. Not even the creak of one of the planks. Nothing! What had she done? What was she doing? Almost he thought that he could guess. Could divine how she--this woman of mystery, this midnight visitor who had crouched near his bed some twenty-four hours ago, who had stolen forth from his room into the storm as a thwarted murderess might have stolen--having now reached the veranda, was pausing to make sure that all was safe; to make sure that there was nothing to thwart her; to disturb her in the doing of that--whatever it might be--which she meditated.

Then there did fall a sound upon his ears, yet one which he only heard because it was close to him; because also all was so still. The sound of an indrawn breath, gentle as the sigh given in its sleep by a little child, yet issuing from a breast that had long been a stranger to the innocence of childhood. An indrawn breath, that was in truth--that must be--the effect of a supreme nervousness, of fear.

"Who is she?" he wondered to himself, while still--his own breath held--he watched and listened. "What is she to him? She is twice his age. Surely this is not the love of the hot, passionate Southern woman! What can she be to him that thus she jeopardizes her life? In my place many men would shoot her dead who caught her as--as--I--shall catch her--ere long."

For he knew now (as he could not doubt!) that no step was to be omitted which should remove him from Desolada, from existence.

"Sebastian and she both know that he fills my place. Well--to-night we come to an understanding. To-night I tell them that I know it too."

While he thus meditated, from far down at the front of the house there once more arose the

trolling of a song in Sebastian's deep bass tones. A noisy song; a drinking, carousing song; one that should have had for its accompaniment the banging of drums and the braying of trombones.

"Bah!" muttered Julian to himself, "you are too late, vagabond! Shout and bellow as much as you choose--hoping thereby to drown all other sounds, such as those of stealthy feet and rattling window blinds, or to throw dust in my eyes. Shout as much as you like. She is here on her evil errand--a moment later she will be in my hands."

In truth it seemed to be so. Past where his eyes were, there went now, as that boisterous song uprose, a black substance which obscured the great gleaming stars from them--the lower part of a woman's gown. Amid the turmoil that proceeded from below, she was creeping on towards her goal.

Julian could scarcely restrain himself now--now that she had passed onward: almost was he constrained to thrust aside the blinds of this great window and spring out upon the woman. But he knew it was not yet the time, though it was at hand. She must be outside the window of his own room by now. The time was near.

Therefore, taking care that neither should his knees crack nor any other sound whatever be made by him, he rose to his feet. Then, he put his hand to the side of the laths to be ready to thrust them aside and follow her. But, perhaps, because that hand was not as steady as it should have been, those laths rattled the slightest. Had she heard? No! He knew that could not be, since now he heard the rattling of others--of those belonging to his own room. Those would drown the lesser noise that he had made--those---

He paused in his reflections, amazed. Down where his room was to the right he heard a sound greater than any which could be caused by the gentle pushing aside of a Venetian blind--he heard a smothered cry, and also something that resembled a person stumbling forward, falling!

Then in a moment he recollected. He knew what had happened. He had forgotten to remove the cord he had stretched across the window at midday ere he slept. He had left it there, and she had fallen forward over it.

In a moment he was, himself, on the veranda and outside the window of his own darkened room. In another he was in that room, had struck a match, and saw her--shrouded, hooded to the eyes--over by the door opening on to the corridor and endeavouring to unfasten it. He noticed, too, that one arm, above the wrist, was bandaged. But she was too late. He had caught her now.

"So," he said, "I know who my visitor is at last, Madame Carmaux. And I think I know your object here. Have you not dropped another phial in your fall and broken it? The room is full of the hateful odour of the Amancay poison."

She made him no answer, so that he felt sure she was determined not to let him hear her voice, but he felt that she was trembling all over, even as she writhed in his grasp, endeavouring to avoid it. Then, knowing that words were unnecessary, he opened the door into the corridor and bade her go forth.

"You know this house well and can find your way easily in the dark. Meanwhile, I am now going to descend to have an explanation with the master of Desolada."

## **CHAPTER XXVI.**

### **"YOU HAVE KILLED HIM!"**

Before however, Julian descended to confront Sebastian he thought it was necessary to do two things; first, to light the lamp to see how much of that accursed Amancay had been spilt by the broken phial, and next--which was the more important--to recharge and look to his revolver. For he thought it very likely that after he had said all he intended to say to Sebastian, he might find the weapon useful.

When he had obtained a light by the aid of the matches which he was never without, he saw that his surmises were fully justified. Upon the floor there lay, glistening, innumerable pieces of broken glass and the half of a broken phial, while all around the *débris* was a small pool of liquid shining on the polished wooden floor. And from it there arose an odour so pungent and so foetid, that he began almost at once to feel coming over him the hazy, drowsy stupefaction that he had been conscious of last night. So seizing his water-jug he unceremoniously sluiced the floor with its contents, washing away and subduing the noisome exhalation; when taking his revolver from

his pocket and seeing carefully to its being charged, he dropped it into his pocket again. He took with him, too, the remnants of the broken phial.

"I shall only return here to pack my few things," he thought to himself, "but, all the same it is as well to have destroyed that stuff. Otherwise the room would have been poisoned with it."

And now--taking no light with him, for his experience of the last two hours had taught him, even had he not known it before, the way down to the garden--he descended, going out by the way that Paz had led him and so around to the lower veranda. A moment later he reached it, and mounting the steps, entered the saloon in which he expected to find Sebastian.

The man was there, he saw at once even before he stood close by the open window. He was there, sitting at the great table where the meals were partaken of; but looking dark and brooding now. Upon his face, as Julian could easily perceive, there was a scowl, and in his eyes an ominous look that might have warned a less bold man than the young sailor that he was in a dangerous mood.

"Has she been with him already," Julian wondered, "and informed him that their precious schemes are at an end, are discovered?"

"Ha!" exclaimed Sebastian, looking fixedly at him, as now Julian advanced into the room, "so you are well enough to come downstairs to-night. Yet--it is a little late. You have scarcely come to sing me those wardroom songs you spoke of, I suppose!"

"No," Julian said, "it is not to sing songs that I am here. But to talk about serious matters. Sebastian Ritherdon--if you are Sebastian Ritherdon, which I think doubtful--you have got to give me an explanation to-night, not only of who you really are, but also of the reason why, during the time I have been in this locality, you have four times attempted my life, or caused it to be attempted."

"Are you mad?" the other exclaimed, staring at him with still that ominous look upon his face. "You must be to talk to me like this."

"No," Julian replied. "Instead, perfectly sane. I was, perhaps, more or less demented last night when under the influence of the fumes of the Amancay plant which had been sprinkled on my pillow, as well as on my jacket and waistcoat; and you also were more or less demented to-night when you had by an accident taken some of the poison into your system, owing to you making a meal of the doctored mountain mullet you had prepared for me--your guest. But--now--we are both recovered and--an explanation is needed."

"My God!" exclaimed Sebastian, "you must be mad!"

Yet, in his own heart, he knew well enough that never was the calm, determined-looking man before him--the man who, hitherto, had been so bright and careless, but who now stood stern as Nemesis at the other end of the table--further removed from madness than he was this night. He knew and felt that it was not with a lunatic but an avenger that he had to deal.

"I am not mad," Julian replied calmly. "Meanwhile, take your right hand out of that drawer by your side, and keep it out. Pistol shots will disturb the whole house, and, if you do not do as I bid you I shall have to fire first," and he tapped his breast significantly as he spoke, so that the other could be in no doubt of his meaning.

"Now," he continued, when Sebastian had obeyed him, he laughing with a badly assumed air of contempt as he did so, all the same, laying his large brown hand upon the table--"now," said Julian, "I will tell you all that I believe to be the case in connection with you and with me, all that I know to have been the case in connection with your various attempts to injure me, and, also, all that I intend to do, to-morrow, when I reach Belize and have taken the most eminent lawyer in the place into my confidence."

As he mentioned the word "lawyer," Sebastian started visibly; then, once more, he assumed the contemptuous expression he had previously endeavoured to exhibit, but beyond saying roughly again that Julian was a madman, he made no further remark for the moment, and sat staring, or rather glaring, at the other man before him. Yet, had that other man been able to thoroughly comprehend, or follow, that glance--which, owing to the lamp being between them, he was not entirely able to do--he would have seen that, instead of resting on his face, it was directed to beyond where he stood. That it went past him to away down to the farther end of the room; to where the open window was.

"Charles Ritherdon," said Julian now, "had a son born in this house twenty-six years ago, and that son was stolen within two or three days of his birth by his uncle, George Ritherdon. You are not that son, and you know it. Yet you know who is. You know that I am."

"You lie," Sebastian said with an oath; "you are an impostor. And even if what you say is true--who am I? I," he said, his voice rising now, either with anger or excitement, "who have lived here all my life, who have been known from a child by dozens of people still alive? Who am I, I say?"

"That at present I do not know. Perhaps the lawyer to whom I confide my case will be able to

discover."

"Lawyer! Bah! A curse for your lawyers. What can you tell him, what proof produce?"

And still, as he spoke, he kept his eyes fixed, as Julian thought, upon him, but in absolute fact upon that portion of the room which was in shadow behind where the latter stood.

Upon, too--although Julian knew it not, and did not, indeed, for one moment suspect such to be the case--a white face, that, peeping round the less white curtains which hung by the window, never moved the dark eyes that shone out of it from off the back of the man who confronted Sebastian. Fixed upon, too, the form to which that face belonged, which, even as Sebastian had raised his voice, had drawn itself a few feet nearer to the other; finding shelter now behind the curtains of the next or nearest window.

"I can at least produce the proofs," Julian replied, his eyes still regarding the other, and knowing nothing of that creeping listener behind, "that my presence in Honduras--at Desolada as your invited guest--caused you so much consternation, so much dismay, that you hesitated at nothing which might remove me from your path. What will the law believe, what will these people who have known you from your infancy--as you say--think, when they learn that three times at least, if not more, you have attempting my life?"

"Again I say it is a lie!" Sebastian muttered hoarsely.

"And I can prove that it is the truth. I can prove that this woman, this accomplice of yours--this woman whom my father--not *your* father, but *my* father--jilted, threw away, so that he might marry Isobel Leigh, my mother--fired at me with a rifle known to be hers and used by her on small game. I can prove that she poisoned the meal that was to be partaken of by me; that even so late as to-night she drenched the floor of my room--as she meant again to drench the pillow on which I slept--with the deadly juice of the Amancay--with this," and he held before Sebastian the broken phial he had found above.

"You can prove nothing," Sebastian muttered hoarsely, raucously. "Nothing."

"Can I not? I have two witnesses."

"Two witnesses!" the other whispered, and now indeed he looked dismayed. "Two witnesses. Yet--what of that, of them! Even though they could prove this--which they can not--what else can they prove? Even though I am not Charles Ritherdon's son and you are--even though such were the case--which it is not--how prove it?"

"That remains to be seen. But, though it should never be proved; even though you and that murderous accomplice of yours, that discarded sweetheart of my father's, that woman who I believe, as I believe there is a God in Heaven, was the prime mover in this plot--"

"Silence!" cried Sebastian, springing to his feet now, yet still with that look in his eyes which Julian did not follow; that look towards where the white corpse-faced creature was by this time--namely, five feet nearer still to Julian--"silence, I say. That woman is not, shall not, be defamed by you. Neither here or elsewhere. She--she--is--ah! God, she has been my guardian angel--has repaid evil for good. My father threw her off--discarded her--and she came here, forgiving him at the last in his great sorrow. She helped to rear me--his son--to--"

"Now," said Julian, still calmly, "it is you who lie, and the lie is the worse because you know it. Some trick was played on him whom you still dare to call your father, on him who was mine--never will I believe he was a party to it!--and before Heaven I do believe that it was she who played it. She never forgave him for his desertion of her; she, this would be murderess--this poisoner--and--and--ah!"

What had happened to him? What had occurred? As he uttered the last words, accusing that woman of being a murderess in intention, if not in fact--a poisoner--he felt a terrible concussion at the nape of his neck, a blow that sent him reeling forward towards the other side of that table against which Sebastian had sat, and at which he now stood confronting him. And, dazed, numbed as this blow had caused him to become, so that now the features of the man before him--those features that were so like his own!--were confused and blurred, though with still a furious, almost demoniacal expression in them, he scarcely understood as he gave that cry that in his nostrils was once more the sickening overpowering odour of the Amancay--that it was suffocating, stifling him.

Then with another cry, which was not an exclamation this time, but instead, a moan, he fell forward, clutching with his hands at the tablecloth, and almost dragging the lamp from off the table. Fell forward thus, then sank to his knees, and next rolled senseless, oblivious to everything, upon the floor.

"You have killed him!" muttered Sebastian hoarsely, and with upon his face now a look of terror. "You have killed him! My God! if any others should be outside, should have seen"--while, forgetting that what he was about to do would be too late if those others might be outside of whom he had spoken, he rushed to both the windows and hastily closed the great shutters, which, except in the most violent tempests that at scarce intervals break over British Honduras,

were rarely used.

And she, that woman standing there above her victim with her face still white as is the corpse's in its shroud, her lips flecked with specks of foam, her hands quivering, muttered in tones as hoarse as Sebastian's:

"Killed him. Ay! I hope so. Curse him, there has been enough of his prying, his seeking to discover the truth of our secret. And--and--if it were not so--then, still, I would have done it. You heard--you heard--how he sneered, gloated over my despair, my abandonment by Charles Ritherdon, so that he might marry that child--that chit--Isobel Leigh. The woman who cursed, who broke my life. Killed him, Sebastian! Killed him! Yes! That at least is what I meant to do. Because, Heaven help me! you were not man enough to do it yourself."

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### "I WILL SAVE YOU."

Beatrix Spranger sat alone in her garden at "Floresta," and was the prey to disquieting, nay, to horrible, emotions and doubts. For, by this time, not only had forty-eight hours passed since she had heard from Julian--forty-eight hours, which were to mark the limit of the period when, as had been arranged, she was to consider that all was still well with the latter at Desolada! but also another twelve hours had gone by without any letter coming from him. And then--then--while the girl had become almost maddened, almost distraught with nervous agitation and forebodings as to some terrible calamity having occurred to the man she had learned to love--still another twelve hours had gone by, it being now three days since any news had reached her.

"What shall I do?" she whispered to herself as, beneath the shade of the great palms, she sat musing; "what! what! Oh! if father would only counsel me; yet, instead, he reiterates his opinion that nothing can be intended against him--that he must have gone on some sporting expedition inland, or is on his way here. If I could only believe that! If I could think so! But I know it is not the case. It cannot be. He vowed that nothing should prevent him from writing every other day so long as he was alive or well enough to crawl to the gate and intercept the mail driver; and he would keep his word. What, what," she almost wailed, "can have happened to him? Can they have murdered him?"

Even as the horrid word "murder" rose to her thoughts--a word horrid, horrible, when uttered in the most civilized and well-protected spots on earth, but one seeming still more terrible and ominous when thought of in lawless places--there came an interruption to her direful forebodings. The parrots roosting in the branches during the burning midday heat plumed themselves, and opened their startled, staring eyes and clucked faintly, while Beatrix's pet monkey--still, as ever, presenting an appearance of misery and dark despair and woe--opened its own eyes and gazed mournfully across the parched lawn.

For these creatures had seen or heard that which the girl sitting there had not perceived, and had become aware that the noontide stillness was being broken by the advent of another person. Yet when Beatrix, aroused, cast her own eyes across the yellow grass, she observed that the newcomer was no more important person than a great negro, who carried in one hand a long whip such as the teamsters of the locality use, and in the other a letter held between his black finger and thumb.

"He has written!" she exclaimed to herself, "and has sent it by this man. He is safe. Oh! thank God!" while, even as she spoke, she advanced towards the black with outstretched hand.

Yet she was doomed to disappointment when, after many bows and smirks and a removal of his Panama hat, so that he stood bareheaded in the broiling sun (which is, however, not a condition of things harmful to negroes, even in such tropical lands), the man had given her the letter, and she saw that the superscription was not in the handwriting of Julian, but in that of his supposed cousin, Sebastian.

"What does it mean?" she murmured half aloud and half to herself, while, as she did so, the hand holding the letter fell by her side. "What does it mean?" Then, speaking more loudly and clearly to the negro, "have you brought this straight from Desolada?"--the very mention of that place giving her a weird and creepy sensation.

"Bring him with the gentleman's luggage, missy," the man replied, with the never-failing grin of his race. "Gentleman finish visit there, then come on here pay little visit. Steamer go back New

Orleans to-morrow, missy, and gentleman go in it to get to England. Read letter, missy, perhaps that tell you all."

The advice was as good as the greatest wiseacre could have given Beatrix, in spite of its proceeding from no more astute Solomon than this poor black servant, yet the girl did not at first profit by it. For, indeed, she was too stunned, almost it might be said, too paralyzed, to do that which, besides the negro's suggestion, her own common sense would naturally prompt her to do. Instead, she stood staring at the messenger, her hand still hanging idly by her side, her face as white as the healthy tan upon it would permit it to become.

And though she did not utter her thoughts aloud, inwardly she repeated again and again to herself, "His luggage! His luggage! And he is going back to England to-morrow. Without one word to me in all these hours that have passed, and after--after--oh! Without one word to me! How can he treat me so!"

She had turned her face away from the negro as she thought thus, not wishing that even this poor creature should be witness of the distress she knew must be visible upon it, but now she turned towards him, saying:

"Go to the house and tell the servants to give you some refreshment, and wait till I come to you. I shall know what to do when I have read this letter."

Then she went back to her basket-chair and, sitting in the shade, tore open Sebastian's note. Yet, even as she did so, she murmured to herself, "It cannot be. It cannot be. He would not go and leave me like this. Like this! After that day we spent together." But resolutely, now, she forced herself to the perusal of the missive.

Dear Miss Spranger (it ran): Doubtless, you have heard from Cousin Julian (who, I understand, writes frequently to you) that he has been called back suddenly to England to join his ship, and leaves Belize to-morrow, by the Carib Queen for New Orleans.

But, as you also know, he is an ardent sportsman, and said he must have one or two days' excitement with the jaguars, so he left us yesterday morning early, in company with a rather villainous servant of mine, named Paz, and, as I promised him I would do, I now send on his luggage to your father's house, where doubtless he will make his appearance in the course of the day.

I wish, however, he could have been induced to stay a little longer with us, and I also wish he had not taken Paz, who is a bad character, and, I believe, does not like him. However, Ju is a big, powerful fellow, and can, of course, take care of himself.

With kind regards to Mr. Spranger and yourself,

I am, always yours sincerely,

SEBASTIAN RITHERDON.

Beatrix let the note fall into her lap and lie there for a moment, while in her clear eyes there was a look of intense thought as they stared fixedly at the thirsty, drooping flamboyants and almandas around her: then suddenly she started to her feet, standing erect and determinate, the letter crushed in her hand.

"It is a lie," she said to herself, "a lie from beginning to end. Written to hoodwink me--to throw dust in my eyes--to--to--keep me quiet. 'Paz does not like him,' she went on, 'Paz does not like him.' No, Sebastian, it is you whom he does not like, and to use Jul--Mr. Ritherdon's own quaint expression--you have 'given yourself away.' Well! so be it. Only if you--you treacherous snake! have not killed him with the help of that other snake, that woman, your accomplice, we will outwit you yet." And she went forward swiftly beneath the shade of the trees to the house.

"Where is that man?" she asked of another servant, one of her own and as ebony as he who had brought the luggage and the letter; "send him to me at once." Then, when the messenger from Desolada stood before her, she said:

"Tell Mr. Ritherdon you have delivered his letter, and that I have read and understand it. You remember those words?"

The negro grinned and bowed and, perhaps to show his marvellous intelligence and memory, repeated the words twice, whereon Beatrix continued:

"That is well. Be sure not to forget the message. Now, have you brought in the luggage?"

For answer the other glanced down the long, darkened, and consequently more or less cool hall, and she, following that glance, saw standing at the end of it a cabin trunk with, upon it, a Gladstone bag as well as a rifle. Then, after asking the man if he had been provided with food and

drink, she bade him begone.

Yet, recognising that if, as she feared, if indeed, as she felt sure beyond the shadow of a doubt, Julian Ritherdon was in some mortal peril (that he was dead she did not dare to, would not allow herself to, think nor believe) no time must be wasted, she gave orders that the buggy should be got ready at once to take her into the city to her father's offices.

"He," she thought, "is the only person who can counsel me as to what is best, to do. And surely, surely, he will not attempt to prevent me from sending, nay, from taking assistance, to Julian. And if he does, then--then--I must tell him that I love----" But, appalled even at the thought of having to make use of such a revelation, she would not conclude the sentence, though there were none to hear it. Instead, she walked back into the garden, and, seating herself, resolved that she would think of nothing that might unnerve her or cause her undue agitation before she saw her father; and so sat waiting calmly until they should come to tell her that the carriage was ready.

But she did not know, as of course it was impossible that she should know, that drawing near to her was another woman who would bring her such information of what had recently taken place at Desolada as would put all surmises and speculations as to why Sebastian Ritherdon's letter had been written--the lying letter, as she had accurately described it--into the shade. A woman who would tell her that if murder had not yet been done in the remote and melancholy house, it was intended to be done, was brewing; would be done ere long, if Julian Ritherdon did not succumb to the injuries inflicted on him by Madame Carmaux. One who would give her such information that she would be justified in calling upon the authorities of Belize to instantly take steps to proceed to Desolada, and (then and there) to render Sebastian and his accomplice incapable of further crimes.

A woman--Zara--who almost from daybreak had set out from the lonely hacienda with the determination of reaching Belize somehow and of warning Beatrix, the Englishman's friend, of the danger that threatened that Englishman; above all, and this the principal reason, with the determination of saving Sebastian from the commission of a crime which, once accomplished, could never be undone. Yet, also, in her scheming, half-Indian brain, there had arisen other thoughts, other hopes.

"She loves him; this cold, pale-faced English girl loves Sebastian," she thought, still cherishing that delusion as she made her way sometimes along the dusty road, sometimes through copses and groves and thickets, all the paths of which she knew. "She loves him. But," and as this reflection rose in her mind her scarlet lips parted with a bitter smile, and her little pearl-like teeth glistened, "when she knows, when I show her how cruel, how wicked he has intended to be to that other man, so like him yet so different, then--then--ah! then, she will hate him." And again she smiled, even as she pursued her way. "She will hate him--these English can hate, though they know not what real love means--and then when he finds he has lost her, he will--perhaps--love me. Ah!" And at the thought of the love she longed so for, her eyes gleamed more softly, more starlike, in the dim dawn of the forest glade.

"I shall save him--I shall save him from a crime--then--he--will--love me." And still the look upon her face was ecstatic. "Will marry me. My blood is Indian, not negro--'tis that alone with which these English will not mix theirs; the negro women alone with whom they will never wed. Ah! Sebastian," she murmured, "I must save you from a crime and--from her."

And so she went on and on, seeing the daffodil light of the coming day spreading itself all around; feeling the rays of the swift-rising sun striking through the forests, and parching everything with their fierceness, but heeding nothing of her surroundings. For she thought only of making the "cold, pale-faced English girl" despise the man whom she hungered for herself, and of one other thing--the means whereby to prevent him from doing that which might deprive him of his liberty--of his life and--also, deprive her of him.

## **CHAPTER XXVIII.**

**"I LIVE TO KILL HIM."**

Still she went on, unhalting and resolute, feeling neither fatigue nor heat, or, if she felt them, ignoring them. She was resolved to reach Belize, or to fall dead upon the road or in the forests while attempting to do so.

And thus she came at last to All Pines, seeing the white inn gleaming in the first rays of the



sun, it being now past six o'clock; while although her thirst was great, she determined that she would not go near it. She was known too well there as the girl, Zara, from Desolada, and also as she who acted as croupier for all the dissipated young planters who assembled at the inn to gamble, she doing so especially for Sebastian when he held the bank. She would be recognized at once and her presence commented on.

Yet she must pass near it, go through the village street to get forward on her way to Belize; she could only pray in her half-savage way that there might be none about who would see her, while, even as she did so, she knew that her chances of escaping observation were of the smallest. In such broiling lands as those of which Honduras formed one, the earliest and the latest hours of the day are the hours which are the most utilized because of their comparative coolness and consequently few are asleep after sunrise.

Yet, she told herself, perhaps after all it was not of extreme importance whether she was recognised or not. By to-night, if all went well, and if the pale-faced English girl and her father had any spirit in them, they would have taken some steps to prevent that which was meditated at Desolada on this very night. And, if they had not that spirit, then she herself would utter some warning, would herself see the "old judge man," and tell him her story. Perhaps he would listen to it and believe her even though she was but half-breed trash, as those of her race were termed contemptuously as often as not.

But, now, as she drew nearer to the village street, and to where the inn stood, she started in dismay at what she saw outside the door. An animal that she recognised distinctly, not only by itself but by the saddle on its back and the long Mexican stirrups, and also by its colour and flowing mane.

She recognised the favourite horse of Sebastian, the one he always rode, standing at the inn door.

At first a sickening suspicion came to her mind; a fear which she gave utterance to in the muttered words:

"He has followed me. He knows that I have set out for Belize." Then she dismissed the suspicion as impossible. For she remembered that Sebastian had been absent from Desolada all the previous day, and had not returned by the time when the others had gone to rest; she thought now (and felt sure that she had guessed aright) that he had slept at the inn all night, and was about to return to Desolada in the cool of the morning.

Determined, however, to learn what the master of that horse--and of her--was about to do, and above all, which direction he went off in when he came outside, she crept on and on down the street until at last she was nearly in front of the inn door. Then, lithe and agile as a cat, she stole behind a great barn which stood facing the *plaza*, and so was enabled to watch the opposite house without any possibility of being herself seen from it.

That something of an exciting nature had been taking place within the house (even as Zara had sought the shelter behind which she was now ensconced) she had been made aware by the loud voices and cries she heard--voices, too, that were familiar to her, as she thought. And about one of those voices she had no doubt--could have no doubt--since it was that of the man she loved, Sebastian.

Then, presently, even as she watched the inn through a crack in the old and sun-baked barn-door, the turmoil increased; she heard a scuffling in the passage, more cries and shouts, Sebastian's objurgations rising above all, and, a moment later, the girl saw the latter dragging Paz out into the open space in front of the inn. And he was shaking him as a mastiff might shake a rat that had had the misfortune to find itself in his jaws.

"You hound!" he cried, even as he did so; "you will lurk about Desolada, will you, at light; prying and peering everywhere, as though there were something to find out. And because you are reprov'd, you endeavour to run away to Belize. What for, you treacherous dog? What for? Answer me, I say," and again he shook the half-caste with one hand, while with the other he rained down blows upon his almost grey head.

But, since the man was extremely lithe, in spite of his age, many of the blows missed their mark; while taking advantage of the twists and turns which he, eel-like, was making in his master's hands, he managed during one of them to wrench himself free from Sebastian. And then, then--Zara had to force her hands over her mouth to prevent herself from screaming out in terror. And she had to exercise supreme control over herself also so that she should not rush forth from her hiding-place and spring at Paz. For, freed from his tyrant's clutches, he had darted back from him, and a second later, with a swift movement of his hand to his back, had drawn forth a long knife that glistened in the morning sun.

What he said, what his wild words were, cannot be written down, since most of them were uttered in the Maya dialect; yet amid them were some that were well understood by Zara and Sebastian; perhaps also by the landlord of the inn and the two or three half-caste servants huddled near him, all of them giving signs of the most intense excitement and fear. And Zara, hearing those words, threw up her hands and covered her face, while Sebastian, his own face

white as that of a corpse's in its shroud, staggered back trembling and shuddering.

"You know," the latter whispered, "you know that! You know?" And his hand stole into his open shirt. Yet he drew nothing forth; he did not produce that which Zara dreaded each instant to see. In truth the man was paralyzed, partly by Paz's words--yet, doubtless, even more so by the look upon his face--and by his actions.

For now Paz was creeping toward the other, even as the panther creeps through the jungle toward the victim it is about to spring upon; the knife clutched in his hand, upon his face a gleam of hate so hideous, a look in his topaz eyes so horrible, that Sebastian stood rooted to the ground. While from his white and foam-flecked lips, the man hissed:

"Shoot. Shoot, curse you! but shoot straight. Into either my heart or head--for if you miss me!--if you miss me--" and he sprang full on the other, the knife raised aloft. Sprang at him as the wild cat springs at the hunter who has tracked it to the tree it has taken refuge in, and when it recognises that for it there is no further shelter--his face a very hell of savage rage and spite; his scintillating, sparkling eyes the eyes of an infuriated devil.

And Sebastian, cowed--struck dumb with apprehension of such a foe--a thing half-human and half a savage beast--forgot to draw his revolver from his breast and seemed mad with dismay and terror. Yet he must do something, he knew, or that long glittering blade would be through and through him, with probably his throat cut from ear to ear the moment he was down. He must do something to defend, to save himself.

Recognising this even in his mortal terror, he struck out blindly--whirling, too, his arms around in a manner that would have caused an English boxer to roar with derision, had he not also been paralyzed with the horror of Paz's face and actions. He struck out blindly, therefore, not knowing what he was doing, and dreading every instant that he would feel the hot bite of the steel in his flesh, and--so--saved himself.

For in one of those wild, uncalculated blows, his right fist alighted on Paz's jaw, and, because of his strength, which received accession from his maddened fury and fear, felled the half-caste to the earth, where he lay stunned and moaning; the deadly knife beneath him in the dust.

For an instant Sebastian paused, his trembling and bleeding hand again seeking his breast, and his fury prompting him to pistol the man as he lay there before him. But he paused only for a moment, while as he did so, he reflected that if he slew the man who was at his mercy now it would be murder--and that murder done before witnesses--then turned away to where his horse stood, and, flinging himself into the saddle, rode off swiftly to Desolada.

As he disappeared, Zara came forth from behind the door where she had been lurking, an observer of all that had taken place, and forgetting, or perhaps heedless, of whether she was now seen or not, ran toward Paz and lifted his head up in her arms.

"Paz, Paz," she whispered in their own jargon. "Paz, has he killed you? Answer."

From beneath her the man looked up bewildered still, and half-stunned by the blow; then, after a moment or so, he muttered, "No, no! I live--to--to kill him yet." And Zara hearing those words shuddered, for since they were both of the same half wild and savage blood, she knew that unless she could persuade him to forego his revenge, he would do just as he had said, even though he waited twenty years for its accomplishment.

"No," she said, "no. You must not. Not yet, at least, Paz, promise me you will not. I--I--you know--I love him. For my sake--mine, Paz, promise."

"I do worse," said Paz, "I ruin him--drive him away. Zara, I know his secret--now."

"What secret?"

"Who he is. Ah!--" for Zara had clapped her little brown hand over his mouth, as though she feared he was going to shout out that secret before the landlord of the inn and his servants, all of whom were still hovering near. "Ah, I not tell it now. But to the other--the cousin--I tell it. Because I--know it, Zara."

"So," she whispered, "do I. But not now. Do not tell it now. Paz, I go to Belize to fetch succour. He will kill *him* if it comes not soon."

"He will kill him to-night, perhaps. I, too, was going to Belize."

"Where is he now?" the girl asked; "where is the handsome cousin? Where have they put him?"

"In the room at end of corridor, with the steps outside to garden. Easy bring him down them."

"Will he die?"

"Not of wound," the man said, his eyes sparkling again, but this time with intelligence, with suggestion. "Not of wound--but--of--what--they--do--to--night."

"I must go," Zara cried, springing to her feet. "I must go. Every minute is gold, and--it is many miles."

"Take the mule," Paz said. "It is there. There," and he glanced towards the stables. "Take him. He go fast."

"I will take him," she replied, "but--but--promise me, Paz, that you will do nothing until I return. Nothing--no harm to him. Else I will not go."

"I will promise," the man said, rising now to his feet, and staggering a little from his giddiness. "I will promise--you. Yet, I look after him--I take care he do very little more harm now."

"Keep him but from evil till to-night--till to-morrow, let him not hurt Mr. Ritherdon, then all will be well." And accompanied by Paz, she went toward the stable where his mule was.

It took but little time for the girl to spring to its back, to ride it out at a sharp trot from the open plaza, and, having again extorted a promise from Paz, to be once more on her road toward Belize--she not heeding now the fierceness of the rays of the sun, which was by this time mounting high in the heavens.

And so at last she drew near to "Floresta," which she knew well enough was Mr. Spranger's abode; near to where the other girl was causing preparations to be made for reaching her father and telling him what she had learned through the arrival of the negro--she never dreaming of the further revelations that were so soon to be made to her. Revelations by the side of which the lying letter and the lying action of Sebastian in sending forward Julian's luggage would sink into insignificance.

She sat on in her garden, waiting now for the groom to come and tell her that the buggy was ready--sat on amid all the drowsy noontide heat, and then, when once more the parrots rustled their feathers, and the monkey opened its mournful eyes, she heard behind her a footstep on the grass; a footstep coming not from the house but behind her, from an entrance far down at the end of the tropical garden. And, looking around, she saw close to her the girl Zara, her face almost white now, and her clothes covered with dust.

"What is it?" Beatrix cried, springing to her feet. "What brings you here? I know you, you are Zara; you come from Desolada."

"Yes," the other answered, "I come from Desolada. From Desolada, where to-night murder will be done--if it is not prevented."

## **CHAPTER XXIX.**

### **THE WATCHING FIGURE**

With a gasp, Beatrix took a step toward the other, while as she did so the latter almost uttered a moan herself; though her agitation proceeded from a different cause--from, in truth, her appreciation of how wide a gulf there was between them. Between them who both loved the same man! Between this dainty English girl, who looked so fresh and fair, and was dressed in so spotless and cool a garb, and her who was black and swarthy, her who was clad almost in rags, and covered with the dust and grime of a long journey made partly on foot and partly on the mule's back. What chance was there for her, what hope, she asked herself, that Sebastian should ever love her instead of this other?

"Murder will be done!" Beatrix exclaimed, repeating Zara's words, even while a faintness stole over her that she thought must be like the faintness of coming death. "Murder will be done. To whom? To Mr.--to Lieutenant Ritherdon?"

"Yes," Zara answered, standing there before the other, and feeling ashamed as she did so of the appearance she must present to her rival, as she deemed her. "Yes, murder. The murder of Lieutenant Ritherdon. But, if you have courage, if you have any power, it may be prevented. And--and--you love him! I know it. There must be no crime. You love him!" she repeated fiercely.

Astonished that the girl should know her secret, unable to understand how she could have learned it, unless for some reason, Lieutenant Ritherdon might have hinted that he hoped such was the case; abashed at the secret being known, Beatrix could but stammer: "Yes--yes--I love him."

"I love him, too!" Zara exclaimed fiercely, hotly; she neither stammering, nor appearing to be put to shame. "I love him too. There must be no crime----"

"You love him!" Beatrix repeated, startled.

"With my whole heart and soul. Do you think our hot blood is not as capable of love as the cold blood that runs in your veins?"

But Beatrix could only whisper again, amazed, "You love him too!"

"I have loved him all my life," Zara said. "I have always loved him. And I will save him."

Then Beatrix understood how they were at cross-purposes, and that this half-savage girl was here, not to save Julian from being murdered so much as to save Sebastian from becoming a murderer.

"Tell me all," she said faintly, sinking into her chair, while she motioned to Zara to seat herself in one of the others that stood close by. "Tell me all that has happened. Then I shall know perhaps what I am to do."

And Zara, smothering in her heart the hatred that she felt against this other girl so much more fair and attractive than she, she who was but a peasant, almost a slave, while her rival had wealth and bright surroundings--told her all she knew.

She narrated how she had watched by day and night to see that no harm was done to the stranger staying at Desolada: how, sometimes, she had slept on the upper veranda and sometimes in the grounds and gardens, being ever on the watch. And then she told the story of all that had happened, of how Madame Carmaux had tried to shoot Julian in the copse and had herself been struck in the arm by a bullet from Paz's rifle, but to avoid suspicion had, on her return to the house, commenced arranging flowers in a bowl with one hand, she keeping the other, which Zara knew she had hastily bandaged up, out of sight. She told, too, the whole story of the Amancay poison, and described the final scene in the lower room which she had witnessed from the garden where she stood hidden.

"And now," she cried, "now they will kill him to-night, get rid of him forever, if, before night comes, help does not reach him."

"What will they do?" asked Beatrix, white to the lips, and trembling all over as she had trembled from the first. "Poison him with that hateful Amancay--or--or----"

"I know not, but they will kill him. They will not keep him there. Instead, perhaps, carry him to one of the lagoons where the alligators are, or to the sea where the white sharks are, or----"

"Come, come!" cried Beatrix, with a shriek of horror. "Come at once to my father in the city. Oh! in mercy, come--there is not an hour, not a moment, to be lost!"

She had seen, almost directly after Zara had made her appearance, the groom come out from the house, and understood that he was approaching to tell her that the buggy was prepared, but by a motion of her hand she had made the man understand that she was not ready. But, now, she must go at once, and she must take this girl with her--that was all important. For surely, when some of the legal authorities in Belize had heard the tale which Zara could tell, they would instantly send assistance to Julian.

"Come!" she cried again. "Come! we must go to the city at once."

"It will save--him?" Zara asked, her thoughts still upon the man who must be prevented at all hazards from committing a horrible crime, and supposing in her ignorance that it was also the desire to prevent that man from committing this crime which made Beatrix so anxious. "It will save--him?"

"Yes," Beatrix answered. "Yes. It will save him."

The night had come, suddenly, swiftly, as it always does in Southern lands. Half an hour earlier a band of twenty people had been riding as swiftly as the heat would permit along the dusty white thread, which was the road that led past All Pines on toward Desolada--now the same band was progressing beneath the swift-appearing stars overhead. The breeze, too, which, not long before, had burnt them with its fiery sun-struck breath, came cool and fresh and grateful at this time, since it was no longer laden with heat; while from all the wealth of vegetation around, there were, distilled by the night dews, the luscious scents and odours that the flowers of the region possess.

A band of twenty people--of eighteen men and two women--who, now that night had fallen, rode more swiftly than they had done before, the trot of the horses being accompanied by the clang of scabbard against boot and spur, of jangling bridle and bridle-chain. For among them was a small troop of constabulary headed by an officer, as well as a handful of the police. Also, Mr. Spranger formed one of the number. The two women were Beatrix and Zara, the former having

insisted on her father allowing her to accompany the force.

When Beatrix had caused Zara to go with her to Mr. Spranger's offices, and then to tell him her tale--a tale supplemented by the former's own account of the letter from Sebastian accompanied by Julian's luggage--that gentleman had at once agreed that there was no time to be lost if Julian was to be saved from any further designs against him. Of course, he and all the Government officials were well acquainted with each other, the Governor included, but it was to the Chief Justice that he at once made his way, accompanied by Zara, who had to tell her tale for a second time to that representative of authority and law.

Then the rest was easy--instructions were given to the Commandant of Constabulary and the Superintendent of Police, and the force set out. Meanwhile, the latter was provided with a warrant (although neither Beatrix nor Zara was aware that such was the case) for the arrest of both Sebastian Ritherdon and Madame Carmaux on a charge of attempted murder.

And now as the little band passed All Pines, Zara, who rode close by Beatrix's side, whispered in the latter's ear that she was about to quit them; she knew, she said, bypaths that she could thread which the others could not do, or in doing, would only make very slow progress.

"But," she concluded, still in a whisper, and with her dark face as close to the fair one of the English girl as she could place it--"I shall be there when you all arrive. And by then I shall know what has been done, or what is to be done. He must not kill him; we must stop that. We love him too well for that."

And, ere Beatrix could answer, the other had disappeared into the denseness of the forest, it seeming as though she had power to impart to the beast which she bestrode her own mysterious and subtle methods of movement.

At first, she was not missed by any of the others, Mr. Spranger being the earliest to do so; but by the time he had observed that she was gone, they had drawn so near to the object of their visit that, even if her absence was noticed, very little remark was made. For now they were, as most in the band knew, on the outskirts of the plantations around Desolada; soon they would be within those plantations and threading their way toward the house itself. What was noticed, however, as now their horses trod on the soft luxurious grass beneath their feet--so gently that the thud of their hoofs became entirely deadened--was that a man, who had certainly not accompanied them from Belize, was doing so at this moment, and that, as they wended their way slowly, this man, who was on foot, walked side by side with them.

"Who are you?" asked the officer in command of the constabulary, bending down from his horse to look at the newcomer, and observing that he was a half-caste. "Do you belong to this property?"

"I did," that newcomer said, looking up at the other. "I did--but not now. Now I belong to you. To the Government, the police."

"So! You desire to give information. Is that it?"

"Yes. That is it."

"What can you tell?"

"That the Englishman not there--that he taken away already, I think----"

"It is not so," a voice whispered close to his ear, yet one sufficiently loud to be heard by all. "It is not so." And, looking round, every one saw the dark, starlike eyes of Zara gleaming through the darkness at them. "He is there--but he will not be for long if you do not make haste."

From one of her hearers--from Beatrix--there came a gasp; from the rest only a few muttered sentences that there was no time to be lost; that they must attack the house at once, and call on the inhabitants to come forth and give an account of themselves. Then, once more, the order was issued for the cavalcade to advance. And silently they did so, Beatrix being placed in the rear, so that if any violence should be offered, or any resistance, she should not be exposed to it more than was necessary.

But there was little or no sign at present of the likelihood of such resistance being made. Instead, Desolada presented now an appearance worthy of its mournful name. For all was darkened in and around it; the windows of the lower floor, especially the windows of the great saloon, from which, or from its veranda, the light of the lamp had streamed forth nightly, were all closed and shuttered; nowhere was a glimmer to be seen. And also the door in the middle of the veranda was closed--a circumstance that certainly during the summer, would have been unusual in any abode in British Honduras.

All were close to the steps of the veranda now, and the officer in command of the constabulary, dismounting from his horse, strode up on to the latter, while beating upon the door with his clenched fist, he called out that he required to see Mr. Ritherdon at once. A summons to which no answer was returned.

"If," this person said, looking around on those behind him, and whose forms he could but dimly see--"if no answer is returned, we shall be forced to break the door down or blow the lock off. Into the house we must get."

"There is now," said Mr. Spranger, who had also dismounted and joined him, "a figure on the balcony of the floor above. It has come out from one of the windows. But I cannot see whether it is man or woman."

"A figure!" cried the other, darting out at once on to the path beneath, so that thus he could gaze up to the higher balcony. "A figure!" and then, raising his eyes, he saw that Mr. Spranger had spoken accurately. For, against the darkness of the night, and the darkness of the house too, there was perceptible some other darker, deeper blur which was undoubtedly the form of a person gazing down at them. A form surmounted by something that was a little, though not much, whiter than its surroundings; something that all who gazed upon it knew to be a human face.

### **CHAPTER XXX.**

#### **BEYOND PASSION'S BOUND.**

A human face was gazing down on them from where the body beneath crouched, as though kneeling against the rails of the veranda--a face from which more than one in that band thought they could see the eyes glistening. Yet, from it no sound issued, only--only--still the white face grew more perceptible and stood out more clearly in the blackness, as the others continued to stare at it, and the eyes seemed to glitter with a greater intensity.

"Come down," cried up the officer now, directing his voice toward where it lurked, "come down and let us in. We have important business with Mr. Ritherdon."

But still no reply nor sound was heard.

"Come down," the other said again, "and at once, or we shall force an entrance; we shall lose no time."

Then from that dark, indistinct mass there did come some whispered words; words clear enough, however, to be heard by those below.

"Who are you?" that voice demanded, "and what do you want?"

"We want," the officer replied, "Mr. Ritherdon. And also, Madame Carmaux, his housekeeper, and the Englishman who has been staying here."

"The Englishman has gone away, back to England, and Mr. Ritherdon is at Belize----"

"Liar!" all heard another voice murmur in their midst, while looking around, they saw that Zara was still there, standing beside the horses and gazing up toward the balcony. "Liar! Both are in the house."

Then in a moment she had crept away, and stolen toward where Beatrix, who had also left the saddle, stood, while, seizing her arm she whispered, "Follow me. Now is the time."

"To him?"

"Yes," Zara said--"yes, to him. To him you love. You do love him, do you not?"

"Ah, yes! Ah, yes! Oh, save him! Save him!"

"Come," said Zara--and Beatrix thought that as the other spoke now, her voice had changed. As, indeed it had. For (still thinking that the English girl could have but one man in her thoughts, and he the one whom she herself loved and hated alternately--the latter passion being testified by the manner in which she had, in a moment of impulse, given him the physic-nut oil and the poisoned mullet) her blood had coursed like wildfire through her veins at hearing Beatrix's avowal, and her voice had become choked. For Beatrix had forgotten in the excitement of the last few hours to undeceive the girl; had forgotten, indeed, the cross-purposes at which they had been that morning in the garden at "Floresta;" and thus Zara still deemed that they were rivals--deemed, too, that this white-faced rival was the favoured one.

"She loves him," she muttered to herself, her heart and brain racked with torture and with passion; "she loves him. She loves him. And he loves her! But--she shall never have him, nor he

her. Come," she cried again, savagely this time. "Come, then, and see him. And--love him. It will not be for long," she added to herself.

Whereupon she drew Beatrix away toward the back of the house, going around by the farthest side of it, and on, until, at last, they stood at the foot of the stairs outside that gave access to the floor above, on that farthest side. Here, they were quite remote from the parley that was going on between those who were in the front and the dark shrouded figure on the veranda above; yet Beatrix noticed that, still, they were not alone. For, as they approached those outside stairs she saw three or four dark forms vanish away from them, and steal farther into the obscurity of the night.

"Who are those?" she asked timorously, nervously, as she watched their retreating figures.

"Men," said Zara, "who to-night will take the Englishman, tied and bound, out to the sea in Sebastian's boat, and sink him."

"Oh, my God!" wailed Beatrix, nearly fainting. "Oh! Oh!"

"If we do not prevent it. If *I* do not prevent it."

Then, suddenly, before Beatrix could put her foot on the steps as Zara had directed her to do, as well as ascend them, she felt her arm grasped by the latter, and heard her whisper:

"Stop! Before we mount to where he is--tell me--tell me truthfully, has--has he told you he loves you?"

"No----"

"You lie!"

"I do not lie," Beatrix replied, hotly, scornfully; "I never lie. But, since you will have the truth--I cannot understand why, what affair it is of yours--although he has not told me, I know it. Love can be made known without words."

Her own words struck like a dagger to the other's heart--nay, they did worse than that. They communicated a spark to the heated, maddening passions which until now, or almost until now, had lain half-slumbering and dormant in that heart; they roused the bitterest, most savage feelings that Zara's half-savage heart had nurtured.

"She scorns me," she said to herself, "she despises me because she knows she possesses his love, the love made known without words. Because she is sure of him. Ay, and so she shall be--but not in life. 'What affair is it of mine?'" she brooded. "She shall see. She shall see."

Then, as once more she motioned Beatrix to follow her up those stairs, she, unseen by the latter, dropped her right hand into the bosom of her dress, and touched something that lay within it.

"She shall see," she said again. "She shall see."

Above, in that obscure, gloomy corridor to which they now entered--the corridor which more than once had struck a chill even to the bold heart of Julian Ritherdon, when he sojourned in the house--all was silent and sombre, so that one might have thought that they stood upon the first floor of some long-neglected mansion from which the inhabitants had departed years before; while the darkness was intense. And, whatever might have been the effect of the weirdness of the place upon the nerves of Zara, strung up as those nerves now were to tragic pitch, upon Beatrix, at least, it was intense. A great black bat, the wind from whose passing wing fanned her cheek and caused her to utter a startled exclamation, added some feeling of ghastly terror to the surroundings, while, also, the company in which she was, the company of a half-Indian savage girl charged with tempestuous passions, contributed to her alarm.

Yet, on the silence there broke now some sounds, they coming from the front part of the house; the sound of voices, of a hurried conversation, of sentences rapidly exchanged.

"You hear," hissed Zara in the other's ear--"you hear--and understand? 'Tis she--Carmaux. And, as ever, she lies. As her life has always been, so is her tongue now."

Then Beatrix heard Madame Carmaux saying from the balcony:

"He has returned. He is coming, I tell you. But just now he has ridden to the stables behind. He will be with you at once. He will explain all. Wait but a few moments more."

"It must be but a very few then," the girl heard in reply, she recognising the voice of the Commandant of the Constabulary. "Very few. He must indeed explain all. Otherwise we force our entrance. Not more than five minutes will be granted."

"You understand?" whispered Zara, "you understand? She begs time so that--so that--the Englishman shall be taken to his death. When he is gone, Sebastian will show himself." Though, to her own heart she added, "Never."

"I can bear no more," gasped Beatrix; "I must see him. Go to him."

"Nay," replied Zara, "he comes to you. Observe. Look behind you--the way we came."

And, looking behind her as the other bade, even while she trembled all over in her fear and excitement, she saw that Sebastian had himself mounted the stairs outside the house, and was preparing to pass along the passage; to pass by them.

Yet, ere he did so, she saw, too, that behind him were those misty forms of the natives which she had observed to vanish at their approach below; she heard him speak to them; heard, too, the words he said.

"When I whistle, come up and bear him away. You know the rest. To my yawl, then a mile out to sea and--then--sink him. Now go, but be ready."

Whereon he turned to proceed along the passage, and, even in her terror, Beatrix could see that he bore in his hand a little lantern from which the smallest of rays was emitted. A lantern with which, perhaps, he wished to observe if his victim still lived, since surely he, who had dwelt in this house all his life, needed no light to assist him in finding his way about it.

"He will see us. He will see us," murmured Beatrix.

"He will never see us again," answered Zara, and as she spoke, she drew the other into the deep doorway of one of the bedrooms. "Never again," while looking down at her from her greater height, Beatrix saw that her right hand was at her breast, and that in it something glistened.

And, now, Sebastian was close to them, going on to the room at the end of the passage. He was in front of them. He was passing them.

"It is your last farewell," said Zara. And ere Beatrix could shriek, "No. No!" divining the girl's mistake; ere, too, she could make any attempt to restrain her, Zara had sprung forth from the embrasure of the doorway, the long dagger gleaming in her hand, as the sickly rays of Sebastian's lamp shone on it, and had buried it in his back, he springing around suddenly with a hoarse cry as she did so--his hands clenched and thrust out before him--in his eyes an awful glare. Then with a gasp he sank to the floor, the lamp becoming extinguished as he did so. Whereby, Zara did not understand that, lying close by the man whom she had slain, or attempted to slay, was Beatrix, who had swooned from horror, and then fallen prostrate.

Sebastian had carried his white drill jacket over his arm as he advanced along the passage, he having taken it off as he mounted the steps, perhaps with the view of being better able to assist the Indians in the task of removing Julian when he should summon them. And Zara, full of hate as she was; full, too, of rage and jealousy as she had been at the moment before she stabbed him, as well as at the moment when she did so, had observed such to be the case, when, instantly, there came into her astute brain an idea that, through this circumstance, might be wreaked a still more deadly vengeance on Sebastian for his infidelity to her.

"He would have sent that other to his death in the sea," she thought; "now--false-hearted jaguar--that death shall be yours. If the knife has not slain you, the water shall." Whereupon, quick as lightning, she seized the jacket and disappeared with it down the corridor, entering at the end of the latter a room in which Julian lay wounded and bound upon a bed. A room in which there burnt a candle, by the light of which she saw that he who was a prisoner there was asleep.

Without pausing to awaken him, she took from off a nail in the room the navy white jacket that Julian had worn--which like Sebastian's own was stained somewhat with blood--and, seizing it in one hand and the candle in the other, went back to where Sebastian lay.

"I cannot put it on him," she muttered, "as he lies thus; still, it will suffice. The Indians will think it is the other in this light, since both are so alike." After which she crept down the passage to the stairs, and, whistling softly, called up the men outside to her, there being five of them.

"He is here," she whispered as they approached Sebastian. "Here. Waste no time; away with him," while they, with one glance at the prostrate body, prepared to obey her, knowing how Sebastian confided many things to her.

But one of that five never took his eyes off the girl, and seeing that from beneath the jacket there protruded a hand on which was a ring--a ring well known by all around Desolada--he drew the jacket over that hand, covering it up. Yet, as he did so, he contrived also to disarrange the portion that lay over Sebastian's face--and--to see that face. Whereupon, upon his own there came an awful look of gloating, even as the Indians bent down and, lifting their burden, departed with it.

"At last," he whispered to Zara, "at last. You not endure longer?"

"No," the girl replied. "No longer. He loved that--that--other--and--and--I slew him. Now, Paz, go--and--sink him beneath the sea forever."

"Yes. Yes. I sink him. He knew not Paz was near, but Paz never forget. I sink him deep. But,



outside--I take ring away so that Indians not know. Oh, yes, he sink very deep. Paz never forget."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### "THE MAN I LOVE."

Recovering her consciousness, Beatrix perceived that she was alone. Yet, dimmed though her senses were by the swoon in which she had lain, she was able to observe that some change had taken place in the corridor since she fell prostrate. Sebastian Ritherdon's body was gone now, but the little lamp which he had carried lay close to the spot where she had seen him fall, while near to it, and standing on the floor, was a candlestick. Within it was a candle, which showed to her startled eyes something which almost caused her to faint again; something that formed a small pool upon the shiny, polished floor. And then as she saw the hateful thing, the recollection of all that had happened returned to her, as well as the recollection of other things.

"He was going to the end of the passage," she said to herself as, rising, she drew her skirts closely about her so that they should not come into contact with that shining, hideous pool at her feet; "therefore, Julian must be there. Oh, to reach him, to help him to escape from this horrid, awful house!" Whereon, snatching up the candlestick from the floor, she proceeded swiftly to the end of the corridor; while, seeing that, far down it, there was one door open, she naturally directed her footsteps to that.

Then, as she held the light above her head, she saw that on a bed there lay a man asleep, or in a swoon--or dead! A man whose eyes were closed and whose face was deadly white, yet who was beyond doubt Julian Ritherdon.

"Oh, Julian!" she gasped, yet with sufficient restraint upon herself to prevent her voice from awaking him. "Oh, Julian! To find you at last, but to find you thus," and she took a step forward toward where the bed was, meaning to gaze down upon him and to discover if he was in truth alive or not.

Yet she was constrained to stop and was stayed in her first attempt to cross the room, by the noise of swift footsteps behind her and by the entrance of Zara, whose wild beauty appeared now to have assumed an almost demoniacal expression.

For the girl's eyes gleamed as the eyes of those in a raging fever gleam; her features were working terribly, and her whole frame seemed shaken with emotion.

"It is done!" she cried exultingly--there being a tone of almost maniacal derision in her voice. "It is done. In two hours he will be dead. And I have kept my word to you. You loved him, and you desired to see him. Well, you have seen him! Did you take," she almost screamed in her frenzy, "a long, last farewell? I hope so, since you will never take another," and in her fury of despair she thrust her face forward and almost into the other's.

But, now, hers was not the only wild excitement in the room. For Beatrix, recognising to what an extreme the girl's jealousy had wrought her, and what terrible deed she had been guilty of, herself gave a slight scream as she heard the other's words, and then cried:

"Madwoman! Fool! You are deceived. You have deceived yourself. I never loved him. Nor thought of him. This man lying here, this man whom he would have murdered, is the one I love with all my heart; this is the man I came to save."

Then as she spoke, Julian--who was now either awake or had emerged from the torpor in which he had been lying--cried from out of the darkness: "Beatrix, Beatrix, oh, my darling!" Whereon she, forgetting that in her excitement she had proclaimed her love, forgetting all else but that her lover was safe, rushed toward where he lay, uttering words of thankfulness and delight at his safety. Yet, when a moment later they looked toward the place where Zara had been, they saw that she was gone. For, slight as was the glimmer from the candle, it served to show that she was no longer there; that in none of the deep shadows of the room was she lurking anywhere.

She had, indeed, rushed from the room on hearing Beatrix's avowal, a prey to fresh excitement now, and to fresh horrors.

"I have slain him in my folly," she muttered wildly to herself. "I have slain him. And--and, at last, I might have won him. God help me!"

Then she directed her footsteps toward where she knew Madame Carmaux was, toward where her ears told her that, below the balcony on which the woman stood, they were making preparations to break into the house. Already, she could hear the hammering and beating on the great door from without; and, so hearing, thought they must be using some tree or sapling wherewith to break it in. She recognised, too, the Commandant's voice, as he gave orders to one of his men to blow the lock off with his carbine.

But without pause, without stopping for one instant, she rushed into the room and out upon the balcony where, seizing Madame Carmaux by the arm, she cried:

"Let them come in. It matters not. Sebastian is dead, or will be dead ere long. I deemed him false to me, as in truth he was. I have sent him to his doom. The Indians have taken him away to drown him, thinking he is that other."

Then from a second woman in that house there arose that night a piercing heartbroken cry, the cry of a woman who has heard the most awful news that could come to her, a cry followed by the words--as, throwing her hands up above her head, she sank slowly down on to the floor of the veranda--

"You have slain him--you have sent him to his doom? Oh, Sebastian! Oh, my son!"

"Yes, your son," said Zara. "Your son."

"It is impossible," they both heard a voice say behind them, the voice of Julian, as now he entered the room with Beatrix. "You are mistaken. Madame Carmaux never had a son, but instead a daughter."

"No," said still another voice, and now it was Mr. Spranger who spoke, all the party from outside having entered the house at last. "No. She never had a daughter, though it suited her purpose well enough to pretend that such was the case, and that that daughter was dead; the birth of her son being thus disguised."

"You hear this," the man in command of the police said, addressing the crouching woman. "Is it true?"

But Madame Carmaux, giving him but one glance from her upturned eyes, uttered no word.

"I have a warrant for your arrest and for this man called Sebastian Ritherdon," the sergeant said. "If he is not dead we shall have him."

"Then I pray God he is dead," Madame Carmaux cried, "for if you arrest him you will arrest an innocent man."

In answer to which the sergeant merely shrugged his shoulders, while addressing one of his force he bade him keep close to her.

"Was he in truth her son?" Julian asked, turning to where a moment before Zara had been standing. But once more, as so often she had done in the course of this narrative, the girl had vanished. Vanished, that is, so far as Julian and one or two others observed now, yet being seen by some of those who were standing near the door to creep out hurriedly and then to rush madly down the corridor.

"No," said Madame Carmaux, glaring at him with a glance which, had she had the power, would have slain him where he stood. "Though I often called him so. It is a lie."

"Is it?" said Julian quietly. "It would hardly seem so. Here is a paper which was written in England ere I set out for Honduras by the man whom I thought to be my father, and in which he tells in writing the whole story he told me by word of mouth. I looked for that paper after his death--and--I have found it here--in the pocket of Sebastian's jacket."

Such was indeed the case. When Zara had run into the room where Julian was, and had possessed herself of his jacket with the naval buttons on it--she meaning by its use to more thoroughly deceive the Indians who were to take Sebastian away in his stead--she had left behind her the other jacket which the latter had carried over his arm. And that, in the obscurity of a room lit only by the one candle, Julian should have hastily donned another jacket so like his own, and which he found in the place where he had lain for three nights, was not a surprising thing. But he recognised the exchange directly when, happening to put his hand into the pocket, he discovered the very missing papers which Mr. Ritherdon said he was going to leave behind for Julian's guidance, but which he must undoubtedly have forwarded to his brother, as an explanation--an account--of his sin against him in years gone by.

"Whoever's son he was," said Mr. Spranger, "he was undoubtedly not the son of Charles Ritherdon and his wife, Isobel Leigh. There can be no possibility of that. Who, therefore, can he have been--he who was so like you?" while, even as he gazed into Julian's eyes, there was still upon his face the look of incredulity which had always appeared there whenever he discussed the latter's claim to be the heir of Desolada.

"If she," said Beatrix now, with a glance toward where Madame Carmaux sat, rigid as a statue and almost as lifeless, except for her sparkling, glaring eyes--"if she never had a daughter, but did have a son, why may he not be that son? Some imposture may have been practised upon Mr. Ritherdon."

"It is impossible," her father said. "He knew his own child was lost--his brother's narrative tells that; she could not have palmed off on him another child--her own child--in the place of his."

"There is the likeness between us," whispered Julian in Mr. Spranger's ear. "How can that be accounted for? Can it be--is it possible--that in truth two children were born to him at the same time?"

"No," said Mr. Spranger. "No. If such had been the case, your uncle, the man you were brought up to believe in for years as your father, must have known of it."

"Then," said Julian, "the mystery is as much unsolved as ever, and is likely to remain so. She," directing his own glance to Madame Carmaux, "will never tell--and--well. Heaven help him! Sebastian is probably dead by now."

"In which case," said the other, always eminently practical, "you are the owner of Desolada all the same. If Sebastian was the rightful heir, and he is dead, you, as Mr. Ritherdon's nephew, come next."

"Nevertheless," replied Julian, "I am not his nephew. I am his son. I feel it; am sure of it."

But, even as he spoke, he noticed--had noticed indeed, already--that there was some stir in the direction where Madame Carmaux was. He had seen that, as he uttered the words "Heaven help him! Sebastian is probably dead by now," she had sprung to her feet, while uttering a piteous cry as she did so, and had stood scowling at Julian as though it was he who had sent the other to his doom. Then, too, he had seen that, in spite of the sergeant of police and one or two of his men having endeavoured to prevent her, she had brushed them on one side and was crossing the room to where he, with Mr. Spranger and Beatrix, stood. A moment later, she was before them; facing them.

"You have said," she exclaimed, "that he is probably dead by now," and they saw that her face was white and drawn; that it was, indeed, ghastly. "But," she continued, "if he is not dead--if yet he should be saved, if the scheme of that devil incarnate, Zara, should have failed--will you--will you hold him harmless--if--if--I tell all? Will you hold *him* harmless! For myself I care not, you may do with me what you will."

"Yes," said Julian. "Yes--if you will----"

"No," said the sergeant of police. "That is impossible. You cannot give such a promise. He has to answer to the law."

"What!" cried Madame Carmaux, turning on the man, her eyes flashing--"what if I prove him innocent of everything--of everything attempted against this one here," and she indicated Julian.

"Do that," said the sergeant, "and he may escape."

"Come, then," she said, addressing Mr. Spranger and Julian; "but not you, you bloodhound," turning on the man. "Not you! Come, I will tell you everything. I will save him."

While, making her way through the others as though she still ruled supreme in the house, and followed by the two men, she led the way to a small parlour situated upon the same floor they were on.

## **CHAPTER XXXII.**

### **THE SHARK'S TOOTH REEF**

Meanwhile the night grew on, and with it there was that accompaniment which is so common in the tropics: the wind rising, and from blowing lightly soon sprang up into what the sailors call half a gale.

Now and again, far away to the east, flashes of rusty red lightning might be seen also, the almost sure heralds of a storm later.

The wind blew, too, over the dense masses of orange groves and other vegetation which go to form the tropical jungle that hereabout fringes the seashore; compact masses that, to many endeavouring to arrive at that shore, would offer an impenetrable, an impassable, barrier. Though not so to those acquainted with the vicinity and used to threading the jungle, nor to the Indians and half-castes whose huts and cabins bordered on that jungle, since they knew every spot where passage might be made, and the coast thereby reached at last.

Zara knew also each of those passages well, and threaded them now with the confidence born of familiarity; with, too, the stern determination to arrive at the end she had sworn to attain, if such attainment were possible.

She had left the room where Madame Carmaux had been confronted, not only by her but by all the others, in the manner described; had left it suddenly, though mysteriously, even as to her maddened brain a thought had sprung, dispelling for the moment all the agony and passion with which that brain was racked. The thought that, as she had sent the man she loved to his doom, so, also, it might not yet be too late to avert that doom--to save him.

The Indians who were bearing him to the old ramshackle sailing-boat he possessed (a thing half yawl and half lugger--a thing, too, which she supposed those men had been instructed to pierce and bore so that it would begin to fill from the first, and should, thereby, sink by the time it was in deep water) must necessarily go slowly, owing to the burden they had to carry, while she--well! she could progress almost as swiftly as the deer could themselves thread the thickets that bordered the coast.

Surely, surely, lithe, young, and active as she was she would overtake those men with their burden ere they could reach the yawl; she would be able to bid them stop, and could at once point out to them the fatal mistake that had been made. She could give them proof, by bidding them take one glance at the features of the senseless man they were transporting, of the nature of that mistake.

So she set out to overtake the Indians with their burden; set out, staying for nothing, and allowing nothing to hinder her. For, swiftly as she might go, every minute was still precious.

And now--now--as the night wind arose still more and the rusty red of the lightning turned to a more purple-violet hue--sure warning of the nearness of the coming storm--she was almost close to the beach where she knew Sebastian's crazy old craft was kept in common with one or two others; namely, a punt with a deep tank for fish, a scow, and a boat with oars. She was close to the beach, but with, at this time, her heart like lead in her bosom because of the fear she had that she was too late.

"No sound," she muttered to herself. "No voices to be heard. They are gone. They are gone. I *am* too late!"

Then, redoubling her exertions, she ran swiftly the remainder of the distance to where she knew the boathouse--an erection of poles with planks laid across them--stood.

And in a moment she knew that she was, indeed, too late. Where the yawl usually floated there was now an empty space; there was nothing in the boathouse but the punt and the rowboat.

"Oh! what to do," she cried, "what to do!" and she beat her breast as she so cried. "They have carried him out to sea, even now the yawl is sinking--has sunk--they will be on their way back. He is dead! he is dead! he must be dead by now!"

While, overcome by the horror and misery of her thoughts, she sank down to the ground. But not for long, however, since at such a crisis as this her strong--if often ungovernable--heart became filled with greater courage and resource. To sink to the ground, she told herself, to lie there wailing and moaning over the impending fate of him she loved, was not the way to avert that fate. Instead, she must be prompt and resolute.

She sprang, therefore, once more to her feet and--dark as was all around her, except for the light of a young crescent moon peeping up over the sea's rim and forcing a glimmer now and again through the banks of deep, leaden clouds which the wind was bringing up from that sea--made her way into the boathouse, where, swiftly unloosing the painter of the rowboat, she pushed the latter out into the tumbling waves and began to scull it.

"They must have gone straight out," she thought, "straight out. And they would not go far. Only to where the water is deep enough for the yawl to sink, or to encounter one of the many reefs--those jagged crested reefs which would make a hole in her far worse than fifty awls could do."

Then still bending her supple frame over the oars, while her little hands clenched them tightly, she rowed and rowed for dear life--as in actual truth it was!--her breath coming faster and faster with her exertions, her bosom heaving, but her courage indomitable.

"I may not be too late," she whispered again and again; "the boat may not yet have filled. I may not be too late."

Suddenly she paused affrighted, startled; her heart seemed to cease to beat, her hands were idle as they clutched the oars. Startled, and despairing!

For out here the water was calmer, there being on it only the long Atlantic roll that is so common beneath the roughness of the winds; except for the slapping and crashing of those waves against the bows of the boat with each rise and fall it made, there was scarcely any noise; certainly none such as those waves had made, and would make against the boathouse and the long line of the shore. So little noise that what she had heard before she heard again now, as she sat listening and terrified in her place. She caught the beat of oars in another boat, a boat that was drawing nearer to her with each fresh stroke--that was, also, drawing nearer to the boathouse.

The Indians were returning. Their work was done!

"I am too late," she moaned. "I am too late. God help us both!"

Then, too, she heard something else.

Over the waters, over the rolling waves, there came to her ears the clear sounds of a man singing in a high tenor--it was almost a high treble--a man singing a song in Maya which she, who was of their race, knew was one that, in bygone days the Caribs and natives had sung in triumph over the downfall of their enemies. A song which, when it was concluded, was followed by a little bleating laugh, one which she knew well enough, a laugh which only one man in all that neighbourhood could give. Then she heard words called out in a half-chuckling, half-gloating tone, still in Maya.

"'Sink him beneath the sea forever,' she say, 'forever beneath the sea.' And Paz he never for get, oh, never, never! Now he sunk," and again she heard the bleating laugh, and again the beginning of that wild Carib song of triumph.

Springing up, dropping the oars heedlessly--her heart almost bursting--the girl rose from her seat, then shrieked aloud--sending her voice in the direction where now there loomed before her eyes a blur beneath the moon's glimmer which she knew to be a boat. "Paz," she cried, "Paz, it is not true, say it is not true. Oh! Paz, where is he?"

"Where you wish. Where you tell me put him," the other called back, while still beneath the brawny, muscular strokes of the Indians rowing it, the boat swept on toward the shore. "Beneath the waves or soon will be. Breaking to pieces on Shark's Tooth Reef. Paz never forget."

"Beast! devil!" the girl cried in her agony, forgetting, or recalling with redoubled horror, that what had been done was her own doing, was perpetrated at her suggestion. "Return and help me to save him. Oh! come back."

But the boat was gone, was but a speck now beneath the moon, and she was alone upon the sea, over which the wind howled as it lashed it to fury at last.

"The Shark's Tooth Reef," she murmured. "The Shark's Tooth Reef, The worst of all around. Yet--yet--if caught on that, the yawl may not sink. Oh! oh!" and she muttered to herself some wild unexpressed words that were doubtless a prayer. Then she grasped the oars once more, which, since they were fixed by loops on to thole pins instead of being loose in rowlocks, had not drifted away as might otherwise have been the case, and set the boat toward the spot where the Shark's Tooth Reef was as nearly as she could guess.

"If I can but reach it," she muttered to herself. "If I can but reach it."

But now her labours were more intense than before, her struggles more terrible. For, coming straight toward the bow of the boat, the Atlantic rollers beat it back with every stroke she took, while also they deluged it with water, so that she knew ere long it must sink beneath the waves. Already there were three or four inches in the bottom--nay, more, for the stretchers were half-covered--another three or four and it would go down like lead. And each fresh wave that broke over the bows added a further quantity.

"To see him once again; only to see him though if not to save," she moaned--weeping at last; "to see him, to be able to tell him that though I sent him to his doom I loved him," while roused by the thought, she still struggled on, buffeted and beaten by the waves; breathless, almost lifeless--but still unconquered and unconquerable.

Suddenly she gave a gasp, a shriek. Close by her, rising up some twenty feet from the sea, there was a cone-shaped rock, jagged and serrated at its summit; black, too, and glistening as, in the rays of the fast rising young moon, the water streaming from off it. It was the Shark's Tooth Reef, so called because, from its long length of some fifty yards (a length also serrated and jagged like the under jaw of a dog), there rose that cone-shaped thing which resembled what it was named from.

And again she shrieked as, looking beyond the base of the cone, peering through the hurtling waves and white filmy spume and spray, she saw upon the further edge of the base of the reef a black, indistinct mass being beaten to and fro. She heard, too, the grinding of that mass against

the reef, as well as its thumps as it was flung on and dragged off it by the swirling of the sea; she heard, how each time, the force of the impact became louder and more deadly.

"To reach him at last," she cried, "to die with him! To die together."

Then it seemed that into that quivering, nervous frame there came a giant's strength; it seemed as though the cords and sinews of her arms had become steel and iron, as though the little hands were vises in the power of their grip. "To die together," she thought again, as, with superhuman efforts, she forced her boat toward the battered, broken yawl.

Now, she was close to it--now!--then, with a crash her own boat was dashed against the larger one, its bow crushed in, in a moment, its stem lifted into the air. But, catlike, desperate, too, fighting fate with the determination of despair, she had seized the top of the yawl's side; had clung to it one moment while the sea thundered and broke against her feet below, and had then drawn herself up onto the deck over the side.

And he was there, lying half-in, half-out the little fore-castle cuddy, bound and corded--insensible.

"I have found you, Sebastian," she whispered, her lips to his cold ones. "I have found you."

With an awful lurch the yawl heeled over, the man's body rolling like a log as it did so, and then Zara knew that the end had come. Even though he lived, nothing could save him now; his arms were bound tightly to his sides, the cords passing over his chest from left to right. He was without sense or power.

"Nothing can save him now--nor me," she said. "Nothing."

Then she forced her own little hands beneath those cords so that, thereby, she was bound to him; whereby if ever they were found, they would be found locked together; she grasping tightly, too, the top ply, so that neither wave, nor roll of sea, nor any force could tear them apart again. And if they were never found--still--still, nothing could part them more.

"Together," she murmured, for the last time, her own strength ebbing fast, "together forever. Together at the end. Always together now--in death!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### MADAME CARMAUX TELLS ALL

Calmly--almost contemptuously--as though she were in truth mistress of Desolada and a woman who conferred honour upon those who followed her, instead of one who was in actual fact their prisoner, Madame Carmaux led the way to that parlour wherein she had promised to divulge all; to reveal the secret of how another man had usurped for so long the place and position which rightfully belonged to Julian Ritherdon.

And they who followed her, observing how rigid, how masklike were the handsome features; how the soft, dark eyes gleamed now with a hard, determined look, knew that as she had said, so she would do; so she would perform. They recognised that she would not falter in her task, she deeming that what she divulged would tell in Sebastian's favour.

Still firm and calm, therefore, and still as though she were the owner of that house which she had ruled for so long with absolute sway, she motioned to Julian and Mr. Spranger to be seated--while standing before them enveloped in the long loose robe of soft black material in which she had been clad, and with the lace hood thrown back from her head and setting free the dark masses of hair which had always been one of her greatest beauties--hair in which there was scarcely, even now, a streak of white.

"It is," she murmured, when the lights had been brought, "for Sebastian's sake, if he still lives. And to prove to you that he is innocent--was innocent until almost the day when he, that other, came here," and her glance fell on Julian--"that I tell you all which I am about to do. Also, that I tell you how I alone am the guilty one."

Her eyes resting on those of Julian and Mr. Spranger, they both signified by a look that they were prepared to hear all she might have to narrate. Then, ere she began the recital she was about to make, she said:

"Yet, if you desire more witnesses, call them in. Let them hear, too. I care neither for what they may think of me, nor what testimony they may bear against me in the future. Call in whom you will."

For a moment the two men before her looked into each other's faces; then Mr. Spranger said:

"Perhaps it would be as well to have another witness, especially as Mr. Ritherdon is the most interested person. My daughter is outside, if-if your story contains nothing she may not hear----"

"It contains nothing," Madame Carmaux answered, there being a tone of contempt in it which she did not endeavour to veil, "but the story of a crime, a fraud, worked out by a deserted, heartbroken woman. Call her in."

Then, summoned by Julian, Beatrix entered the room, and, taking a seat between her father and her lover, was an ear-witness to all that the other woman had to tell.

For a moment it seemed as if Madame Carmaux scarce knew how to commence; for a few moments she stood before them, her eyes sometimes cast down upon the floor, sometimes seeking theirs. Then, suddenly, she said:

"That narrative which George Ritherdon wrote in England when he was dying, and sent to his brother Charles, who was himself close to his end, was true."

"It was true!" whispered Julian, repeating her words, "I knew it was! I was sure of it! Yet how--how--was the deception accomplished?"

"He loved me," madame exclaimed, she hardly, as it seemed, hearing or heeding Julian's remark. "Charles loved me--till he saw her, Isobel Leigh. And I--I--well, I had never loved any other man. I did not know what love was till I saw him. Then--then--he--what need to seek for easy words--he jilted me, and, in despair, I married Carmaux on the day that he married her. It seemed to my distracted heart that by doing so I might more effectually erase his memory from my mind forever. And my son was born but a week or so before you, Julian Ritherdon, were born."

"Sebastian. Not a daughter?" Julian said.

"Yes; Sebastian; not a daughter. Yet, later, when it was necessary that my child should be registered, I recorded the birth as that of a daughter, and at the same time I registered that daughter's death. Later, you will understand why it was necessary that any child of mine should disappear out of existence, and also why, above all things, it must never be known that I had a son."

Again Julian looked in Mr. Spranger's eyes, and Mr. Spranger into his, their glances telling each other plainly that, even now, they thought they began to understand.

"I heard," Madame Carmaux went on, "that she too had borne a son, and in some strange, heartbroken excitement that took possession of me, I determined to go and see Charles Ritherdon, to show him my child, to prove to him--as I thought it would do--that if he who had forgotten me was happy in marriage, so, too, was I. Happy! oh, my God! However, no matter for my happiness--I went.

"I arrived here late at night, and I found him almost distracted. His wife was dying: she could not live, they said; how was the child to live without her? Then I promised that, if he would let me stay on at Desolada, I would be as much a mother to that child as to my own, that I would forget his cruelty to me, that I would forgive.

"'Come,' he said to me, on hearing this, 'come and see them--come.' And I went with him to the room where she was, where you were," and she looked at Julian.

"I went to that room," she continued, "with every honest feeling in my heart that a woman who had sworn to condone a man's past faithlessness could have; before Heaven I swear that I went to that room resolved to be what I had said, a second mother to you. I went with pity in my heart for the poor dying woman--the woman who had never really loved her husband, but, instead, had loved his brother. For, as you know well enough, she had been forced to jilt George Ritherdon even as Charles had jilted me. I went to that room and then--then we learned that she was dead. But, also, we learned something else. There was no child by her side. It was gone. Its place was empty."

"I begin to understand," murmured Julian, while Beatrix and her father showed by their expression that to them also a glimmering of light was coming.

"Yet," said Madame Carmaux, "scarcely can you understand--scarcely dream of--the temptation that fell in my way. In a moment, at the instant that Charles Ritherdon saw that his child was missing, he cried, 'This is my brother's doing! It is he who has stolen it. To murder it, to be avenged on me for having won his future wife from him. I know it.' And, distractedly, he raved again and again that it was his brother's doing. In vain I tried to pacify him, saying that his brother was far away in the States. To my astonishment he told me that, on the contrary, he was here, close at hand, if not even now lurking in the plantation of Desolada, or at Belize.

"I saw him there yesterday," he cried, "I saw him with my own eyes. Now I understand what took him there. It was to steal my child--to murder it. Great God! to thereby become my heir."

"As he spoke there came a footfall in the passage; some one was coming. Perhaps the nurse returning; perhaps, also, if George Ritherdon had only been there a short time before us, she did not know that the child had been kidnapped. 'And if she does not know, then no one else can know,' he cried. 'While,' he said, 'if that unutterable villain, George, thinks to profit by this theft, I will thwart him. He may rob me of my child, he may murder the poor innocent babe--but he at least shall never be my heir,' and as he spoke his eyes fell on *my* child in my arms. 'Cover it up,' he whispered, 'show its face only, otherwise the clothes it wears will betray it. Cover it up.'"

"If this is true, the crime was his," whispered Julian.

"*That* crime was his," said Madame Carmaux, "the rest was mine. But--let me continue. As Charles spoke, the nurse was at the door--a negro woman who died six months afterward--a moment later she was in the room. Yet not before I had had time to whisper a word in his ear, to say, 'If I do this, it is forever? If your child is never found, is mine to remain in its place?'--and with a glance he seemed to answer, 'Yes.'"

"None ever knew of that substitution, no living soul ever knew that the child growing up as his, its birth registered by him at Belize as his, was, in truth, mine. Not one living soul. Nor were you ever heard of again. We agreed to believe that you had been made away with. Yet, as time went on, Charles Ritherdon seemed to repent of what he had done; he came to think that, after all, his brother might not have been the thief, or, being so, that he had not slain the child; to also think that perhaps some of the half-castes or Indians, on whom he was occasionally hard, might have stolen it out of revenge. And it required all my tears and supplications, all my prayers to him to remember that, had he not been cruelly false to me, it would in truth have been our child which was the rightful heir, which was here--his child and mine! At last he consented--provided that the other--the real child--you--were never heard of again. My son should remain in his son's place, if you never appeared to claim that place.

"Sebastian grew up in utter ignorance of all; he grew up also to resemble strangely the man who was supposed to be his father--perhaps because from the moment I married Monsieur Carmaux it was not his image but that of Charles Ritherdon which was ever in my mind.

"But when George Ritherdon's statement came, and with it the information that you were in existence, Charles determined to tell Sebastian everything. He would have done so, too, but that the illness he was suffering from took a fatal termination almost directly afterward--doubtless from the shock of learning what he did. Yet it made no difference, for the day after his death Sebastian found the paper and so discovered all."

"He knew then," said Julian--though as he spoke his voice was not harsh, he recognising how cruel had been this woman's lot from the first, and how doubly cruel must have been the blow which fell on her when, after twenty-five years of possession, the son whom she had loved so, and had schemed so for, was about to be dispossessed--"he knew then who I was when we first met, and--and--God forgive him!--from that moment commenced to plot my death."

"No!" cried Madame Carmaux. "No! Have I not said that he was innocent? It was I--I--who plotted--alas! he was my son. Will not a mother do all for her only child? It was I who changed the horses in their stalls, putting his, which none but he could ride in safety, in place of the sure-footed one he had destined for you; it was I--God help and pardon me! who put the coral snake in your bed--I--I--who did the rest you know of."

"And did you, too, procure the Indians who were to take me out to sea and drown me?" asked Julian with a doubtful glance at her. "Surely not. There was a man's hand in that. And it was Sebastian who was advancing along the passage when Zara's knife struck him down."

"By instigation I did it," Madame Carmaux cried, determined to the last to shield the son she still hoped to meet again in this world--"the suggestion, the plot was mine alone. While because he was weak, because from the first he has ever yielded to me, he yielded now. Spare him!" she cried, and flung herself upon her knees before that listening trio, her calmness, her contemptuousness, vanished now. "Spare him, and do with me what you will."

So the story was told, so the discovery of all was made at last. Julian knew now upon how simple a thing--the fact of Madame Carmaux having taken that strange determination to go and see the man who had cast her off and jilted her, carrying her child in her arms--the whole mystery had rested. But what he never knew was that, had Zara lived, she could have also told him all. For in the savage girl's love for the man, who in his turn had treated her badly, and in her determination to be ever watching over him, she had long since overheard scraps of conversation which had revealed the secret to her in the same way as they had done to Paz.

And it was to her, and her determination to prevent Sebastian from committing any crime by which his life or his liberty might become imperilled, that Julian owed the fact that he had not long since died by the hand of Madame Carmaux--if not by that of Sebastian.



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### CONTENTMENT

"And on her lover's arm she leaned,  
And 'round her waist she felt it fold."

Some two or three months of Julian's leave remained to expire at the time when the foregoing explanation had taken place, and perhaps nothing which had occurred since the day when he first set foot in British Honduras had caused him more perplexity than his present deliberations as to how to make the best of that period.

For now he knew that he had done with the colony for ever; he had achieved that for which he had come to it; he had proved the truth of George Ritherdon's statement up to the hilt, and--in so far as obtaining the possession of that which was undoubtedly his--well! the law would soon take steps to enable him to do so.

Only, when he told himself that he had done with the colony, when he reflected that henceforth his foot would never tread on its earth more, he had also to tell himself that he could alone consent to sever his connection with it by also taking away with him the most precious thing it contained in his eyes--Beatrix Spranger.

"For," he said to that young lady, as once more they sat in the garden at "Floresta," with about and around them all the surroundings that he had learned to know so well and to recall during many of the gloomy nights and days he had spent at Desolada--the great shade palms, the gorgeous flamboyants and delicate oleander blossoms, as well as the despairing looking and lugubrious monkey--"for, darling, I cannot go without you. If I were to do so, Heaven alone knows when I could return to claim you; and, also, I cannot wait. Sweetheart, you too must sail for England with me, and it must be as Mrs. Ritherdon."

He said the same thing often. Indeed at night, which is--as those acquainted with such matters tell us--the period when young ladies pass in review the principal events that have happened to them during the day, Beatrix used to consider, or rather to calculate, that he made the same remark about twenty times daily. While, since, loving and gentle as she was, she was also possessed of a considerable amount of feminine perspicacity, she supposed that he reiterated the phrase upon the principle that the constant drop of water which falls upon a stone will at last wear it away.

"Though," the girl would say to herself in those soft hours of maiden meditation, "he need not fear. He cannot but think that his longing is also shared by me."

Aloud, however, when once more he repeated what had become almost a set phrase, she said:

"You know that you have taken an unfair advantage of me. Indeed, though it was only by chance, you have put me to terrible mortification. You overheard my avowal to that unhappy girl, my avowal that--that--I loved you." And Beatrix blushed most beautifully as she softly uttered the words. "Think what an avowal it was. To be made by a woman for a man who had never asked for her love."

"Had he not," Julian said, "had he not, Beatrix? Never asked for that love on one happy day spent alone by that woman's side, when he confided everything to her that bore upon his presence here; and she, full of soft and gentle sympathy, told him all her fears and anxiety for the risks he might run. And, did he not ask for that love on the night which followed that day, as they rode back to Belize beneath the stars?"

And now his eyes were gazing into hers with a look of love which no woman could doubt, even though no other man had ever looked at her so before; while since loverlike, they were sitting close together, his arm stole round her waist.

To the inexperienced--the present narrator included--it may be permitted to wonder how lovers learn to do these things as well as how they discover, too, the efficacy of such subtle tenderness; yet one is told that they are done, and that the success thereof is indisputable.

Nor, with Beatrix, did either the look of love or the soft environment of his arm fail in their effort, as may be judged from her answer to his whispered question, "It shall be, shall it not, darling?"

"Yes," she murmured, blushing again and more deeply. "Yes. If father permits."

And so Julian's love grew toward a triumphant termination; yet still there were other matters to be seen to and arranged ere he, with his wife by his side, should quit the colony forever. One thing, however, it transpired, would require little trouble in arranging; namely, the property of Desolada, when the law should put him in possession of it, since, on investigation being made after the disappearance of Sebastian, it was found to be so heavily mortgaged that to pay off the loans upon it would leave Julian without any capital whatever; while, at the same time, he would be saddled with a possession in a country with which he had nothing in common. Of what had become of the money left by Charles Ritherdon at his death (and it had been a substantial sum) or of what had become of the other sums borrowed on Desolada, there was no one to inform them.

Sebastian had disappeared, was undoubtedly gone forever--and of his fate there could be little doubt. Certainly there could be no doubt in the minds of either Beatrix or Julian or of Mr. Spranger, who had of course been made acquainted with the substitution of Sebastian for Julian. Zara also had disappeared, and Madame Carmaux had--escaped.

How she had done it no one ever knew, but in the morning which followed that eventful night when she made her confession, she was missing from her room, at the door of which one of the constabulary had been set as a guard. That she should be able so to evade those who were passing the night at Desolada was easily to be comprehended when, the next day, her room was examined; they understood how she might have passed on to the balcony outside that room, have traversed it for some distance, and then have made her way into some other apartment, and so from that have descended the great stairs in the darkness, and stolen away into the plantations. At any rate, whether these surmises were correct or not, she was gone, and she has never since been seen in British Honduras.

Yet one planter, who makes frequent journeys to New Orleans in connection with his imports and exports, declares that only a few months ago he saw her in Lafayette Square in that city. It was at the time when the terrible scourge of Louisiana, the yellow fever, is most dreaded, and even as the planter entered the Square he saw a man lying prostrate on the ground, while afar off from him, because of fear of the infection, yet regarding him with a gaping curiosity, was a crowd of negroes and whites. Then, still watching the scene, this gentleman saw a woman clad in the garb of a Nun of Calvary, who approached the prostrate man, and, while calling on those near to assist him, ministered to his wants in so far as she could. And, her veil falling aside, the planter declared that he saw plainly the face of the woman who, in British Honduras, had been known for a quarter of a century as Miriam Carmaux. He also recognized her voice.

If such were the case, if, at last, that tempestuous soul--the soul of a woman who, in her earlier days, had had meted out to her a more cruel fate than falls to the lot of most women--if at last the erring woman who had been driven to fraud and crime by the love she bore her child--had found calm, if not peace, beneath that holy garb, perhaps those who have heard her story may be disposed to think of her without harshness. Such was the case with Julian Ritherdon, who, as she made her confession, forgave her for all that she had attempted against him--since she was scarcely a greater sinner than his own father, who had countenanced the fraud she perpetrated, or his uncle, whose early vindictiveness led to that fraud. Such, also, was the case with Beatrix, from whose gentle eyes fell tears as she listened to the narrative told by the unhappy woman while she was yet uncertain of the doom of the son for whom she had so long schemed and plotted. And so let it be with others. If she had erred, so also she had suffered. And, by suffering, is atonement made.

You could not have witnessed, perhaps, a brighter scene than that which took place on a clear October morning in the handsome Gothic church of Belize, when Julian Ritherdon and Beatrix Spranger became man and wife.

Space has not permitted for the introduction of the reader to several other sweet young English maidens whose parents' affairs have led to their residences in the colony; yet such maidens there are in Honduras--as the inquiring traveller may see for himself, if he chooses--and of these fair exiles some were, this morning, bridesmaids. They, you may be sure, lent brightness and brilliancy to the scene, and so did the uniforms of several young officers of her Majesty's navy, these gentlemen having been impressed into the ceremony. For, as luck would have it, not a week before, H.M.S. Cerberus (twin-screw cruiser, first-class, armoured) had anchored, off Belize, and, as those acquainted with the Royal navy are aware, no officer of that noble service can come into contact with any ship belonging to it (as Julian Ritherdon soon did) without finding therein old friends and comrades. Be very sure also, therefore, that George Hope, George Potter, John Hamilton, that most illustrious of naval doctors, "Jock" Lyons, and many others dear to friends both in and out of the service, all came ashore in the bravery of their full dress--epaulettes, cocked hats, and so forth--while the *Padre* "stood by" to lend a hand to the local clergyman in performing the ceremony. While, too, the path from the churchyard gates to the church door was lined by bluejackets who, of course, were here clad in their "whites" and straw hats.

But, because rumour ever runneth swift of foot, even in so small a colony as this--where,

naturally, its feet have not so much ground to cover--and in so small a capital as Belize, with its six thousand inhabitants, the church was also filled with many others drawn from the various races, mixed and pure, who dwell therein. For, by now, there was scarcely a person in either the colony or capital to whose ears there had not come the news that the handsome young officer who was in a few moments to become the husband of Miss Spranger, was, in truth, the rightful owner of Desolada. Likewise, all knew that Sebastian had never been that owner, but that he was the son of Carmaux, who had perished by the fangs of the tommy-goff, and of the dark, mysterious beauty who had come among them as Miriam Gardelle and had married him. And they knew, too, that this marriage was to be the reward and crown of dangers run by Julian, of more than one attempt upon his life, as well as that it was the outcome of a deep fraud perpetrated and kept dark for many years.

Paz was there, too, his eyes glistening with rapture at the sound of the Wedding March, his weird soul being ever stirred by music; so, also, was Monsieur Lemaire, grave, dignified, and calm as became a French gentleman in exile, and with, about him as ever, that flavour of one who ought by right to have walked in the gardens of Versailles two hundred years ago, and have basked in the smiles of the Great Monarch.

And so they were married, nor can it be doubted that they will live happy ever afterward--to use the sweet, old-time expression of the storybooks of our infancy. Married--she given away by her father; he supported by his oldest friend in the Cerberus--and both passing happy! Married, and going forth along the path of life, he most probably to distinction in his calling, she to the duties of an honest English wife. Married and happy. What more was needed?

"I come," he said to her that afternoon, when already the steamer was leaving Honduras far astern, and they were travelling by the new route toward Kingstown on their road to England--"I came to Honduras to find perhaps a father, perhaps an inheritance. Neither was to be granted to me, but, instead, something five thousand times more precious--a wife five thousand times more dear than any parent or any possession."

"And," she asked, her pure, earnest eyes gazing into his, "you are contented? You are sure that that will make you happy?"

To which he replied--as--well! as, perhaps--if a man--you would have replied yourself.

**THE END.**

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BITTER HERITAGE: A MODERN STORY OF LOVE AND ADVENTURE \*\*\*

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