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-o-o-

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HER SENATOR.

DON BALASCO

OF KEY WEST

A NOVEL

BY

ARCHIBALD CLAVERING GUNTER

AUTHOR OF

"MR. BARNES OF NEW YORK" ETC., ETC.

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Don Balasco of Key West.

BOOK I.

AN AGENT OF SPAIN.

CHAPTER I.

THE UNITED STATES REVENUE DETECTIVE.

TAMPA is sleeping in the sun one hot April day of the year 1896. Always a lazy town, this afternoon it is more trance-like than ever. The only man thoroughly awake in the City Hotel is Thomas Duff Mastic, of the United States Revenue Service, and he has just roused himself to mutter curses under his breath at a letter he holds in his hand.

It is from an officer of the Treasury, under whose orders Mastic at present is, and directs him to take steamer this day for Key West and place himself under the directions of Señor Estrabon Balasco, a cigarmaker of that city.

"Hang me if I understand this!" mutters the United States detective to himself, for it is in this capacity Mastic is attached to the Revenue Depart-

ment. "Now, if I had been told to shadow and track Mr. Estrabon Balasco, who is the most outspoken Cuban sympathizer in that nest of Cuban patriots, and prevent his sending a filibustering expedition with arms and explosives to Gomez or Maceo, I would have understood it quick enough—but to place myself under the orders of Don Balasco—that's what he's called down there. Great Scottie! Is the State Department becoming a lover of patriots? Is Grover going to give those poor devils of Cubans a chance, now that the American people have, by their Congress, told him to do so? It I thought that I'd drink his health."

With this, uttering a prolonged whistle and scratching his short, straight, shock hair in a dazed kind of way, Mr. Tom Mastic strolls slowly out of the hotel, and after a short but contemplative walk on Main street, steps into the office of the Plant Steamship Company and procures transportation on the fast liner *Olivette*, which leaves Port Tampa for Havana, touching at Key West on her way to the Cuban capital.

This finished, Mr. Thomas Duff Mastic has nothing to do but drink, ruminate, and smoke till the evening, when he will take the train from the town proper to Port Tampa, which, some eighteen miles away, is situated at the end of a long wharf upon which the railroad extends to deep water, and consists of a terminus made up of a gigantic platform, and a hotel yclept "The Inn," from whose balconies sea-trout, bass, and other ocean fish may be caught by passengers waiting for steamers bound for Mobile or Havana and Key West, which big craft find plenty of water

alongside of this platform and artificial dock created by enterprising Americans upon the deep channel of Tampa Bay, which is, in other parts, shallow and pertaining to mud flats.

Mr. Mastic has been quite often called by his enemies a hard man; and of these enemies, in the pursuit of his duties, capturing illicit stills in the mountains of Georgia and North Carolina, and nosing out smugglers in the Florida Keys, he has made a great many. Still, no one has ever called him an unjust man, or a timid man. Perchance a little girl whose blue eyes and soft Southern voice had persuaded Mr. Mastic one day to turn his eyes away from her mother's illicit distillery of "mountain dew" in a backwoods nook by the French Broad River, "'cause dad has just been lynched"; and perhaps a Spanish *muchachito* with soft dark eyes, caught by the protector of Federal Revenue peddling unstamped cigars in the streets of St. Augustine at five cents a piece, and let go with a quarter in his hand and the remark, "You sell these clear Havanas too cheap, sonny," thought him a tender one. But generally against man in his strength, and defying Federal Revenue, Tom Mastic is a sleuthhound to follow, and no more to be turned back than a grizzly bear, even by the unerring rifles of Georgia crackers, or revolvers held in the desperate hands of Florida smugglers. He has defied ambush and assassination, and has turned his back on bribery, and as such is trusted by the United States Treasury Department.

For five hours there is nothing to do, and Mr. Mastic does it grandly. His feet are cocked

higher on the table than any gentleman's in the barroom of the City Hotel. He drinks his mint julep more languidly, he inhales his smoke more contentedly, and lets it out in larger and softer rings of vapor than any of the crowd of loungers. He even eats his supper slowly, though he has boasted that at a pinch he can finish a meal and handcuff a man in sixty seconds railroad-time.

But this nonchalance vanishes shortly before nine o'clock; then Tom Mastic is alert and on duty.

As he takes the train for Port Tampa, *en route* for Key West, his ferret eyes gleam with a quick and sly twinkle; his movements, which have been like those of a locomotive slowly getting under way, now become as rapid, vigorous, and direct as those of an express hundred-ton engine under full head of steam. As he boards the train, both eyes and ears grow very wide open to things happening near him, for Mr. Mastic's maxim is, "You never know when you may drop on the unexpected." It is in this view that he throws his eyes around the railroad carriage, taking rapid note of the people about him.

"Nothing remarkable on this car, I reckon," he thinks; but a moment after, two couples entering almost together attract his attention; the first pair because they are Cubans or Spaniards, and may be something in the line of Mr. Mastic's further duties; the second, who are a boy and a girl, because the beauty of the girl interests him and something the boy says astonishes him.

These two take seats immediately in front of Mr. Mastic.

The girl is about seventeen, perhaps even younger, for she wears her fair blonde hair in one long pigtail, juvenile fashion, hanging down her back, and her skirts have not yet grown below her boot-tops; a fact that pleases Mr. Mastic, as he admires pretty feet and ankles, and this young lady's are about the prettiest he has ever seen in his life.

The boy, apparently her brother, is a youth about eighteen, of manly, resolute face and stalwart, athletic build. "One of the kind out of which they manufacture football men for the colleges up North," cogitates the detective, whose attention is now entirely riveted upon the young lady and gentleman in front of him.

The Cubans or Spaniards he can make his study afterward, he thinks, if necessary, and the conversation of the girl and the boy almost immediately interests Mr. Mastic.

"My poor Rex," laughs the maiden, "has he been surly all day because by this time he might have had a broken nose playing football on his prep-team?"

"Don't call it a prep-team, or you'll give me away. People about here think I'm a college man," mutters the boy; "and besides"—here scorn comes into his voice—"we don't play football at this time of the year. Football in April? No one but a girl or a Frenchman would make such a break."

"Well, you can revenge yourself on me at lawn tennis on our island," prattles the inquirer with merry eyes. "What has made you so gloomy ever since we left Palatka? Is it coming south to

bring me to papa and summer and tropic islands and muslin dresses that makes you act as if you had the cares of a family on you?"

"Don't talk Tommy-rot!" says the boy, savagely. "You know I have you under my charge and you'd beat a bike girl on a tandem to keep in order." Then his voice goes into a whisper, as he speaks into the young lady's ear: "Don't you know those two Spaniards have been following us, I think, ever since we left Jacksonville? You use your blue eyes too thundering much, Gertie. Some day you'll get a bluff that'll astonish you."

"I haven't used them at all," answers the accused, tears coming into her two pretty orbs. "I cannot help it if men look at me. It is not my fault, and every time I have put my nose out of the window at a station since I left New York, you have lectured me. When you get married I pity your wife; you'll be a Bluebeard or a—a Sultan."

"Well, if those chaps come round again, I'll knock them off the dock at Port Tampa. I've got you in my charge, remember that, and, by George, I'll deliver the goods safe at Emerald Key."

"Emerald Key?" echoes the girl. "Perhaps papa will meet us at Key West."

"No, he won't," says the boy shortly. "Didn't I tell you I had a letter from him saying he wouldn't be at Key West; that Indra and he were going to take a run on the yacht to Miami and Palm Beach; and if the *Flying Fish* was not at Key West to meet us I could probably get a steam-launch from a Spaniard down there named Balasco."

"Oh, Don Estrabon Balasco," chimes in the

young lady. "He is the gentleman who acted as agent for the owner and who sold Emerald Key to papa a year ago."

"Of course," answers the boy. "The guv'nor writes that in case we need it we can probably get the use of Balasco's steam-launch to take us over to our place. It is only twenty or thirty miles over there. I could row it in a shell; they say the water down here is calm as Croton."

This mention of the man to whom he is to report makes the Revenue detective doubly intent upon the conversation of the boy and girl in front of him.

He learns incidentally, during the forty minutes it takes the train to run to Port Tampa, that the father of the two is George Alfred Vanstone, a retired New York merchant and capitalist, who has, the year before, bought one of the little keys which dot the Gulf of Florida, upon which he has built a country house, and is now spending his first spring season in this land of summer, thus exchanging the cold and snow of the great northern city for the bright sunshine and tropical breezes of those balmy islands that extend in one almost unbroken chain from Key West to the Biscayne Bay on the East; that Miss Indra Vanstone, the eldest daughter of the house, is a young lady of twenty or thereabouts who has been going the pace during the New York social season as belle and bud, and that she has come to Florida for Lenten languor and tropical rest; that the boy and girl in front of him are the young son and daughter of this New York gentleman, and one is named Rex and the other Gertrude; that apparently the young gen-

tleman does not like his spring trip to the South, as he would sooner carry off athletic honors in the spring school and college sporting events; but the young lady is delighted because it takes her away from her books and boarding school. Also that, like most boys of his age, Mr. Rex Talbot Vanstone considers himself the mentor and guardian of his younger sister, and is inclined to be pretty sharp upon any of the charming frivolities of feminine youth and beauty.

Further observations are cut short by the train running out upon the long wharf and stopping at the big pile-supported terminus of the Florida Southern Railway, beside whose dock the dashing steamer *Olivette* is awaiting its passengers for Key West and Havana.

The girl rising and shaking out fluffy skirts preparatory to leaving the car, suddenly puts her head out of the window, sees the waiting steamer and falters: "Oh, Rex, I am so afraid!"

"Afraid of what? Those cursed Spaniards?" mutters her brother.

"No-o—of seasickness," returns Miss Gertrude. Then with a slight laugh, though there is perhaps a shade of apprehension in it, she exclaims: "There! They are looking at me again—those Cubans! Rex, hold my grip-sack so you can't double up your fists!" With these words the maiden, after the manner of girls of her age, gives a sudden pull at her short skirts to make them as long as possible, and steps out of the car followed by her brother, whose hands are too full of umbrellas, gun case, and other *impedimenta* to permit any more hostile demonstration than a scowl.

As the detective stands in front of his seat, watching the vanishing boy and girl, the two men who have produced Miss Gertie's remark brush hurriedly past him, and Mastic catches words that make him start: "*Diablo!* Those are two of the innocents who will conceal a crime against Spain."

In one flash the Revenue detective has turned his attention from youth and beauty to a couple of as hard-looking customers as he has ever gazed upon, very Spanish in appearance, very greasy as to skin, garlicky as to odor, and rather cut-throaty and knife-in-the-back as to manner.

With the instinct of his profession he gazes hurriedly at the men, seeking some distinguishing trait; not at their general appearance, for this oftentimes leads to strange mistakes of identity; but for some peculiar mark, some brand, as it were, by which he may know them again.

The first as he passes hurriedly out of the car gives Mastic no such point of identification; the second, who is the taller of the two, and of a stalwart build unusual in the races of the Iberian Peninsula, fortunately furnishes him with what he wants. The right ear of this man is much larger than his left, and stands out from his head in grotesque elephantine prominence. It is corrugated, red, shiny, and gigantic. So with a muttered "I'll know that Spaniard's bloated ear anywhere," Mastic gathers up his belongings, which are simple, and follows them from the car.

On the platform he finds the American boy and girl have disappeared, probably having gone directly on board the steamer.

The two men who have attracted his attention

are muttering in Spanish, and not being proficient enough in that language to pick up Castilian whispers, Mr. Mastic strolls leisurely on board the steamer. Awaiting the two gentlemen who arouse his curiosity, as they come up the gang-plank he discovers that their tickets are also for Key West, and that the one with the peculiar ear calls the other Pablo, and is in return designated as Juan.

It is now ten o'clock at night ; the steamer, casting off her moorings, is soon under headway down Tampa Bay, and passing the lights of St. Petersburg on the right, stands out into the open Gulf of Mexico ; then turning to the south and skirting the low coasts of Florida, with its outlying coral reefs, keys, and small islands, the *Olivette* puts her prow straight for Key West.

Satisfied that nothing can happen of any moment this night, the detective goes to his stateroom and turns in ; awaking the next morning upon a summer sea, smooth as the waters of an inland lake, whose only ripples come from the churning propeller of the swift *Olivette* as she dashes toward the equator.

At breakfast Mr. Mastic contrives to seat himself near the American boy and girl. From the conversation of pretty Miss Vanstone and her brother, the revenue man learns no more than he did the night before, save that their father has, besides some small sailing boats at his place among the Florida Keys, a big steam yacht.

"It's a deuced shame," grumbles the boy, "that Indra should have wanted the *Flying Fish* to take that trip to Palm Beach just when we were com-

ing down. Didn't she have enough of fashionables in New York last winter?"

"Oh, I know why she wants to go up there," laughs Gertrude, "our Billy must be up at the Hotel Poinciana."

"Our Billy is a thing of the past," remarks Rex; "Indra put Mr. William Arthur Severance in the sweet by-and-by two months ago. Our Billy has become sulky and is traveling for his health." Then the boy's face grows thoughtful, and he continues, "I think Indra has made an utter fool of herself. Billy Severance was the best fellow I ever knew—and *liberal*! You should have seen the dinner he gave me at the Union Club one night. That fellow was never tired of putting up for me. What times he used to give me! By Jove! I have often thought he loved me."

"That was because he loved Indra, you conceited fellow," rejoins Miss Gertie. "But I'm awfully sorry Indra has shaken him. Our Billy was good for the nicest Christmas presents and the most elaborate Easter cards. I feared there might be something wrong when I did not get one from him three weeks ago." Then she cries almost savagely, "Oh, why did Indra put our Billy in the sweet by-and-by?"

"Jealousy!" says Rex, sententiously.

"Jealousy? Indra jealous?" ejaculates Gertie, her blue eyes opening wide in unbelief.

"No; our Billy did the great Othello act," remarks the boy. "I'm not quite sure of the details, but I have an idea it was about that beast, Von Stamp, of the German Embassy—that fellow who

dances the cotillion so well, after the Russian style, *à la* jumping jack. You see, Indra's not accustomed to be talked to—Billy Severance talked to her—and they didn't happen to be really engaged, only bordering on. The next time our Billy called, Indra was 'not at home.' He called again and Miss Vanstone was still out. He dropped in a third time and Miss Vanstone had not come in yet. Then the next steamer for Europe had in its passenger list William Arthur Severance. A month after he came back to New York, but he never called, and, then I think—Hang it!" says the boy, "I think Indra repented. It's the only time in her life she ever did, if I'm right. You see she has grown so accustomed to having every fellow that comes along do the enthusiastic over her that she doesn't know a jolly good thing when she's got it. Do you know what it is rumored in the clubs she told him to do? She told him *to go to work!*"

"Work!" cries Gertie in astounded interrogation. "Why Billy's got pots of money."

"Yes, and bushels of sand. But that's what she told him—to get to work—make a start in life—become somebody—get a hustle on! That's nice kind of talk to a man who is a man among men and has a record. Why, Billy Severance was right tackle eight years ago when Yale men were giants. And now he tools a four-in-hand round pegs at the horse show, and plays polo like blazes on the West Rockaway, and they say he could be as good a lawyer as Joe Choate, if he'd ever taken the trouble to study, only he hasn't read law. Yet that's what they state Indra said to a man like that

—told him *to go to work!* I am dis-gust-ed!" and Rex's face shows that he is.

"Besides, our Billy knows just what brand of candies I like at Maillard's," chimes in Miss Gertrude, adding, with a sigh for departed sweets: "Indra has made a fool of herself. I shall give papa a piece of my mind about it. He lets Indra have her own way too much."

"Yes; we're all spoilt children," laughs Rex. "But let us go on deck and take a constitutional. I feel the want of exercise, now I've gone out of training."

As the two rise from the table, the detective finishes his breakfast and strolls on deck also, to pass a lazy, sleepy, tropical day; wisely thinking that any attempt at espionage will be noticed by the two Spaniards, who arise about noon and are apparently unacquainted with any of their fellow-passengers.

Consequently Mr. Mastic deems it prudent to let things drift. Muttering to himself, "I reckon developments will strike me in Key West," he devotes himself to a novel he has purchased at a bookstand in Tampa.

Eating a good midday meal, he finds himself strong and agile and ready for almost anything that may come to hand, as about three o'clock the boat approaches Key West.

From the deck of the *Olivette* the appearance of this place is that of a pretty town of twenty or thirty thousand people, faced by the blue waters of the Floridian straits, and flanked, backed, and dotted over by greenest tropical vegetation. This afternoon the city seems calm, businesslike, and

peaceful, and though Spanish in appearance, and Cuban in heart, an awful contrast to Havana, only one hundred miles to the south, on the same quiet sea, which is now under the crimson hand of Weyler; its streets full of frightened citizens; its fortresses reeking with the filth of the tropics, and choked with dying political prisoners. But Key West is under modern government, and covered by the Stars and Stripes of free America, while over Havana floats the banner of Spain, indicative of the medieval barbarism of Alva, rising up in this nineteenth century, with the same cruel ferocity and as great a lust of plunder, rapine, and blood, as when, three hundred years ago, it was buried by the destruction of the Spanish Armada and the rise of the Dutch Republic.

Apparently unmindful of the sorrows of Havana just across the Gulf Stream, Key West is bright and smiling in the afternoon sea breeze. Its streets are full of people busied with the arts of peace. Sponge fishermen are unloading their crafts. Steamers are discharging their cargoes of tobacco at its quays. Horse-cars are running along its streets, and electric lights are getting ready to twinkle in the tropical twilight like gigantic fire-flies.

But all this does not attract Mr. Mastic's attention to any great degree as the *Olivette* runs alongside the Plant wharf. He has seen the place before, many times, in his raids upon the tobacco smugglers of this portion of Florida. The prevailing Spanish style of its Panama-hatted population, the Cuban appearance of its side streets, its negro

coachmen with their Spanish lingo and cheap fares, are all familiar to him.

At present his attention is divided between the young Americans and the two Spaniards, who have apparently been following them.

Suddenly his mind is given wholly to the boy and girl, for Rex Vanstone cries: "See, Gertie! There she is!—the *Flying Fish*! And, by George, she's got steam up! We're in luck! We shall be at Emerald Key to-night."

"Perhaps papa or Indra may be on board," ejaculates Miss Gertie, and there is a whisk of short skirts and flickering of pretty ankles as the girl flies across the deck, followed by her brother.

Mr. Mastic, directed by the eager gestures of the young Americans, perceives among the craft of the harbor a dashing looking pleasure vessel, large enough to very comfortably navigate these quiet waters, though hardly of sufficient power for the demands of a long ocean cruise. The vessel is about one hundred and twenty-five feet long, has a light and graceful hull of brilliant white, sits low in the water, and apparently has engines of considerable power. A dining-room amidships, and a pilot-house just forward of it, rest gracefully on a snowy deck, the after portion of which is covered by a light, pretty, striped awning. On her stern is painted *Flying Fish*, and her bow is decorated with a figurehead representing that pretty little denizen of equatorial waters. Altogether the yacht is a very likely craft, and the revenue man, noting her big propeller, short massive smokestack, and space devoted to her

engines, decides she must be at least a fifteen-knotter in fine weather.

While the detective has been making these observations, the boy and girl have been talking.

"Rex," cries Miss Gertie, "don't you think papa can be on board?"

"You are a hummer on yachts!" sneers her mentor. "How can papa be on the *Flying Fish*, when the owner's flag is not hoisted?"

"Well, somebody's on board, any way," replies the young lady. "There! I'm sure they recognize me. See! a boat is putting off! Much you know about yachts, Rex. I'm sure it's papa."

"Sure it's papa?" laughs young Vanstone. "Does papa have jetty hair and black mustachios? The gov'nor hasn't gone in for dyeing his locks yet, has he? Though I'll admit he is a pretty gray badger."

"Oh, Rex! That would be too awful! Dyed hair would indicate a coming step-mamma; and you know Indra and I couldn't stand anything of that kind."

"Well, you're safe this time," laughs the boy, "for that hair ain't dyed, and the chap we're looking at is a Spaniard, if my eyes are good for anything."

Gazing at the approaching boat, which is now nearly alongside, the youth adds, "Who the deuce is he any way?"

This is very shortly answered. A gentleman, in white Panama hat and light tropical costume, to which is given a touch of barbaric color by a red silk sash artistically draped about the waist, steps over the gangplank which now connects the

steamer with the wharf, and after a hurried word or two with the captain, that officer approaches the two young Americans and says, "Mr. and Miss Vanstone, permit me to introduce Don Estrabon Balasco, who has been making inquiry for you."

"Ah, I am delighted to have the pleasure," remarks the Spanish gentleman, giving the boy and girl the polished bow of the citizen of the world. "Your father wrote me that you might wish my steam-launch, but fortunately your own yacht is here. I have taken the liberty of in—inspecting her." The Don hesitates, perchance, a little over the word. "She is all ready for your trip to Emerald Key."

While this is going on, Mastic, though he knows him by sight, is studying the gentleman to whom he is accredited in Key West. He finds that Estrabon has dark, flashing eyes, and very black hair and mustache, is slightly yet strongly built, and has that lithe grace and subtle charm peculiar to the Castilian race, especially when it has been made soft and languid by a residence in the tropics.

Señor Balasco, in appearance, is hardly thirty years of age, but notwithstanding his youth is one of the largest cigar manufacturers in Key West, his factory occupying a big plot of ground on the main street, [his signs being as notable and his business apparently as extensive as those of Horace R. Kelly or E. H. Gato or any other of the more prominent manufacturers of this town, which is devoted to cigars, cigarettes, sponges, and Cuban patriotism.

As he inspects him, the Spaniard is in eager conversation with the boy and girl.

"So, you are the Señorita Vanstone," he says, addressing Gertie. "Come to Florida, I presume, to elude New York gayety."

There is *empressement* in the Don's eyes and manner. With a spasm of joy the budding girl thinks: "He takes me for a young lady," and puts very grateful eyes upon him.

But these become almost teary, as Rex breaks out in boyish frankness: "Oh, don't mistake her for Indra. That would be a terrible fluke. And don't judge Indra by either of us. Indra is in a class by herself."

"Oh, Rex, how can you talk so?" mutters Gertie, pleadingly. "Indra is only two years older than I am."

"Two years and *eleven months*," says the youth, with mathematical and cruel accuracy.

But Balasco is a man of the world, and though he looks in rather a laughing way at this boy and girl dispute, he ends it diplomatically by saying, "Come this way. I will show you to your boat, Señorita Gertrude. There is a flight of steps leading from the wharf to the water. I have examined the *Flying Fish* and discovered that she is very fast; in three hours you will be in the arms of your father, to whom you will, I hope, present my most profound regards. Some day—soon, perhaps—Mr. Vanstone has invited me—I may have the honor of paying you all a visit at charming Emerald Key."

"Oh, that will be lovely!" murmurs Miss Gertrude, as Balasco assists her down the gangplank with the etiquette of an Hidalgo, and the customs officer, having nothing better to do, follows them

off the boat and sees the Don performing the same polite offices to the young lady once more at the stairs leading to the water.

Gazing idly at this, Mastic finds two ideas rising in his brain. First, something has happened that has made Miss Indra Vanstone suddenly postpone or give up her visit to Palm Beach, therefore the *Flying Fish* is now at Key West. Second, for some reason or other Balasco has taken this opportunity to examine and inspect this vessel.

From this reverie the revenue man is suddenly startled. Around him are the crowd that usually throng the wharf at Key West on the arrival of one of the Florida boats: sponge fishermen, long-shoremen, the residents of the town, mostly Cuban; tourists, who are passing a few tropic days on the delightful island; cigar manufacturers, smoking their inevitable cigarettes; pretty, dark-eyed Spanish girls from the packing departments of the various cigar houses, and the usual blur of darkies and darky pickaninnies that go to make up the population of this town of all colored skins—white, yellow, chocolate, and black, but chiefly black.

From out this crowd almost immediately behind him come words that make the detective start:

“*Caspita!* Don Balasco is weaving his cuttlefish arms around these two little plotters against Spain.”

Thomas Duff Mastic is sure the voice is that of one of the Spaniards of the railroad car. He does not, however, look round immediately, but nonchalantly watches the boat as it is rowed away by two stalwart deck-hands of the yacht, Don Balasco

waving his adieux to the young American boy and girl, and telling them he will send their baggage after them in quarter of an hour.

As this is going on Mastic, turning carelessly about, sees in front of him the Spaniard of the gigantic ear. Beside this man stands his companion of the railroad. Half a minute later Don Balasco, skipping lightly up the wooden stairs, steps upon the wharf, mingles with the crowd, and is apparently about to devote himself to the shipment of the baggage of young Vanstone and his sister.

While doing so the revenue detective steps beside him, remarking: "Don Estrabon Balasco, I believe. I am ordered to report to you by the Treasury Department.

This communication, though made guardedly, seems to give the cigarmaker a sudden electric shock. His face grows pale. He whispers: "I understand; but do not speak to me publicly; it may mean my life. Meet me privately, at my house at eight o'clock."

Then, not waiting for answer, Señor Balasco runs hastily on board the steamer again and begins effusively asking the purser if he cannot have the baggage of the young Americans immediately placed on shore.

Gazing after him, the United States officer cogitates: "By Jove, this is the unexpected! This fellow is a traitor to the Cubans, and fears for his life. That is the reason I am ordered to report to him." Then suddenly the revenue man scratches his shock head, and this problem comes into Thomas Duff Mastic's brain: "What the devil have that free-spoken young American schoolboy and

that pretty little New York schoolgirl got to do with plots against Spain?"

CHAPTER II.

THE CIGARMAKER OF KEY WEST.

To this problem Mr. Mastic finds no immediate solution as he occupies himself in carelessly playing the rôle of tourist, during which time he notes that the *Flying Fish* gets under way, and, after rounding the southern point of the island, steams to the eastward.

Then, not liking the publicity of the Russell House, he strolls to an out-of-the-way and modest little hotel, which is more than half boarding-house, and registers under the name of Robert Johnson, announcing to the landlady that he has come down to see if he cannot pick up a lot of cheap sponges for the northern market.

This being finished, Mastic leaves his baggage and proceeds to kill time by taking a trip about the town in one of Key West's famous cheap-fare, dilapidated carriages. The driver of this is an equally aged and dilapidated negro, whose tongue, however, is agile and keeps in motion, though his broken-down horse at times manifests a decided inclination to inertia. The drive will only cost about twenty-five cents; so Mastic invests.

During this jaunt the detective is again impressed by the apparent size of Estrabon Balasco & Co.'s cigar factory, and encouraging his driver to talk about things local, the government officer discovers the address of Don Estrabon's residence,

and incidentally picks up some very curious additional information.

"That's a pretty big establishment, that of Balasco," he remarks carelessly, as his tumble-down chaise runs past the great building.

"Yes, boss," answers the negro, who is, contrary to the general run of darkies in Key West, partly American. Like most of his race, being inceptive, he has picked up a good deal of genuine Cuban patriotism, mingled with an equal quantity of ungrammatical Spanish lingo. "Don Estrabon is one of de big bosses round heah. *Mucho grande!* He is as cute as a Yankee, *Sabe!*"

"Cute as a Yankee? Does he make better cigars than any one of the rest of the Hidalgos about here?" returns Mastic, inquiringly.

The answer he gets astonishes him.

"*Diablo, dat no de trick now! Must habe tabaco to make de cigarros! Oder man, dey no get de tabaco. Don Balasco he get mucho—mucho tabaco!*"

"For a patriot, Balasco has a wonderful pull with Spanish officials," thinks Mastic, with a grin. Then he suggests: "Don Balasco is a patriot, *Cuba Libre*, eh?"

"Yes, he true Cuban! He get *mucho tabaco* from Habana," adds the negro, as if the two went together; though the detective thinks it is a rather curious combination.

But at the little hotel, after his drive, Mastic finds everybody agrees as to Don Balasco's devotion to the cause of Cuba.

At supper this is impressed upon him by a cigarmaker, who, sitting next him, re-

marks to the revenue man's casual questions: "Yes, Don Estrabon is a stanch friend of *Cuba Libre*. He has none in his employ but exiles from the island—patriots who give a portion of their weekly wages to aid the cause. As one of these I reverence him. The closing of his factory would be a blow to the haters of Spain. Recognizing this, Don Balasco, with rare foresight, has provided that none of his employees shall go idle on his account. It would be a blow to the cause, if his Cuban cigarmakers should be thrown out of employment. But with the audacity of a general and the wisdom of a Yankee, he has made such arrangements that every day adds to his stock of tobacco, while the other great manufacturers here can hardly get a leaf."

"Umph! I am delighted to know he is such a patriot," replies the American, and goes to thinking that probably Don Balasco may have his own interests in his eye in filling up his factory, and possibly some particular pull with the Spanish authorities at Havana, by which he receives large shipments, when his rivals in trade find it difficult to obtain a bale of tobacco from the island.

Full of these ideas, at eight o'clock, according to instructions, the detective goes to Don Balasco's, cautiously making his way to a cottage on a side street, which, nestled among bananas, palms, and cocoanut trees, seems a veritable haven of peace and quiet.

The house is of wood, painted generally white. It has large verandas and green Venetian blinds. The whole appearance of the place is American, not Spanish, though a hammock is swinging on

the veranda, indicating tropical siestas in the heat of the day. The front entrance has an electric bell, upon touching which the door is opened by a darky butler, and Mastic is shown into the parlor.

"Don Balasco is at present submerged with some gents in de dining-room. I'll take yo' card concisely to him," remarks the darky servitor, after showing the detective in.

"I haven't got a pasteboard with me," is the detective's reply; "but kindly tell the Don that the gentleman with whom he has an appointment at eight o'clock is here. He will understand."

The sable butler going on his way, the revenue man looks around the apartment, to find it furnished in American style, with northern conveniences, yet southern airiness, its big windows opening directly upon the wide porticoes. A chandelier illuminates the room brilliantly, bringing out some very pretty paintings, and a few handsome pieces of bric-à-brac in cabinets. Making an inspection of these, the detective, who has an eye for beauty, is attracted by the photograph of a young lady, which has been very prettily framed and stands on one of the cabinets. It has been beautifully colored in water tints, and shows a girl of very light brown hair, dancing, riant blue eyes, and exquisite figure, the beauties of which are easily discernible, as the young lady is in a fashionable evening gown, apparently arrayed for opera or ball.

"By Jove! That's no dark-eyed señorita of Spain," laughs Mastic to himself, for the appearance of the young lady of the picture is de-

cidedly American. The face is Anglo-Saxon, and though laughing and brilliant in expression, has that decision and self-reliance peculiar to daughters of the United States.

As the detective makes this remark, he discovers that the announcement of his presence has produced an immediate effect upon the gentleman he visits. He hears Don Balasco's soft, smooth Castilian voice in the hall, saying in Spanish—a language of which Mastic has picked up a little in his Key West experiences:

“Remember, you are cigarmakers. Apply for work at my factory to-morrow.”

Thinking this a rather peculiar statement to make to applicants for employment, the revenue man throws a hasty glance into the hall and sees a gigantic ear disappearing out of the front door.

A moment after his host comes in to him with outstretched hand, and says cordially, though not effusively, in a voice that is low almost to a whisper, “I hope I have not kept you waiting, Señor Mastic.”

“I have been using my time very pleasantly,” returns the American, who cannot keep his eyes from the picture.

“Ah, yes,” remarks Balasco, lifting up the photograph to the light. “It is so beautiful it would attract any man. So lovely! I would like to know who she is.”

“You don't know the name of the girl?” asks the detective, astonished.

“I have not an idea,” replies the Don, with the suspicion of a sigh. “It came into my possession in the way of business.”

“In the way of business?”

"Yes; you see it is a fashion of my trade to make our cigar-boxes alluring by adding to them the faces of fair women. It is the advertisement of the actress, the pride of the professional beauty. But stage loveliness is now almost exhausted, and we have a man in New York who devotes a great deal of his time to finding for trade uses pictures of new Venuses. This photograph was sent to me by him; probably picked up in the sale of some fashionable photograph gallery which was moving or bankrupt."

"And probably now has become the trademark of Estrabon Balasco & Company," chuckles Mastic.

"*Por Dios!* No!" cries the Don, suddenly. Then he goes on, a tinge of romance in both voice and eye: "This is not the face of a woman who would wish her loveliness to be made public on a cigar-box. I have had it tinted by an artist, and sometimes wonder if the flesh and blood original is half as fascinating as the photograph." Next, as if to change the topic, Balasco, dropping his tones to a whisper, remarks: "I have been notified by the Collector that you would consult me in behalf of the United States Government. Step into the dining-room; there I will discuss the matter with you over a cigar and a glass of wine."

"I am with you on the cigar and wine," remarks the free and easy American, as he follows the Don along the lighted hall into an apartment which is at the other end of the cottage. Here the rich silver, the massive carved oaken sideboard, and the remains of a magnificent meal which has been served with floral decoration, more in the style of a

prince than a cigarmaker, call forth an astonished "Gee whiz!" from Mr. Mastic.

"Ah! you like my quarters," remarks Estrabon. "They are quite good for a Key West bachelor. Permit me to offer you Spanish hospitality. By this wine"—he pours out a generous libation—"I have the honor to drink the health of you and your good President."

"Here's at you!" replies Mastic, and puts down his throat something that he cannot describe, but which seems to him smoother than the finest Bourbon and more delicious in flavor than the juice of a sugar pine.

"What kind of punch is it?" gasps the detective, smacking his lips and indulging in a long and luxurious breath.

"Punch! *Por Dios!* It is Madeira of forty years vintage—have another glass?"

"I don't care if I do," remarks Mr. Mastic. "I accept your hospitality, *Señor*, in the way in which it is offered."

"Then I hope you will enjoy my cigars," suggests Don Balasco, and he puts before the revenue man an Havana which causes that functionary, after a preliminary whiff or two, to remark: "By gosh! These beat any samples I ever confiscated, and I have done a good deal of that from Florida smugglers."

"They are *Regalias Imperiales*, manufactured specially for the Captain-General of Cuba, the Czar of Russia, and myself," remarks the Don. "You had better enjoy them this evening. You may never get another chance, unless you visit me again."

"Then I'll take your hint," laughs Mastic. "You'll excuse me, but it's a habit I have—" and he fills his pockets from the box.

"*Diautre!*" grins Estrabon, though his face is astonished. "I hope you will show as much activity in seizing the scoundrels upon whose track I am about to place you."

"Name 'em!"

"I will!—but first——" Here the Spaniard steps quickly to the French windows, opens them and looks cautiously out on the veranda, then closing the sashes, he drops the curtains and draws the blinds, next steps to the door, closes and locks it, and coming to the revenue officer, who has watched him in nonchalant unconcern, whispers to him: "Your life, as well as mine, might be lost if we were overheard. These scoundrels would not hesitate to sacrifice any one to their accursed cause." The Don grinds his white, firm teeth together over his last words.

"Nominate the wretches," remarks the detective between whiffs of his cigar, that seem to him, in their aroma and flavor, like puffs of the land breeze from a Florida key when the pineapples are ripening.

"The wretches I refer to are the Cuban sympathizers in this place and Florida."

"That's a rather curious statement from a Cuban patriot like you!" laughs Mastic.

"Cuban patriot—bah!" ejaculates Estrabon. Then he goes on sneeringly. "How I trick them—to know their secrets." A moment's pause and he goes on more calmly: "But there can be no secrets between you and me, *Señor* Officer—I have

the word of your superior as to your silence and discretion. I may as well tell you I am a hater of Cuban rebels and an agent of the Spanish Government."

"Ah, then I think I understand you," returns the revenue man slowly. "You have some knowledge of an expedition to be fitted out to carry arms and ammunition to the insurgents on the island. I suppose you want me to put a revenue cutter or a United States war vessel upon them—some of the work I have been trying to do in regard to the *Three Friends*."

"*Diablo!* The *Three Friends!* If we could catch that vessel! Not here, where it would be a trial, a farce, a mockery, a let-go; but in Cuba, what a fine butchery we would have!" cries the Spaniard, triumph and blood in his eye.

"No doubt of it," remarks the revenue man grimly. "But these massacres cost your cause more than your defeats. They lose you the sympathy of the American people."

"*Caramba!* What do we care for the sympathy of the American people as long as we have the American Government, with its warships and its revenue cutters, to aid us?"

"Well, for the present I reckon you've got us!" answers the detective, glumly. Then he continues, as if anxious to avoid discussion: "Better get to business and quit politics. I am here to do my duty by my government and execute my orders. What expedition have you reason to think is being fitted out to violate United States neutrality in these parts?"

"It is not immediately here," replies the Don,

"but at one of the islands about thirty miles to the west of us—Emerald Key."

"Emerald Key!" ejaculates the customs officer. "Great Scott! that is the home of George Vanstone. His son and daughter are there."

"Bah! That is the cunning of the man. He has his family there beside him to give him innocence—a superb place, pineapple plantation, cocoanut grove, keeps open house, entertains friends. But he is plotting to send a filibustering expedition to Cuba; he is an enemy of Spain."

"What object do you suppose Vanstone can have in such an affair? He is an American merchant."

"What is the object of every Yankee merchant? *Money!*"

"But Vanstone is a millionaire. Look at his steam yacht."

"Ah! It is the steam yacht that will do the business!" cries the Spaniard. "*Caramba!* don't you think I know he is a millionaire? Does that keep any Yankee merchant from wishing *more* millions? He is a Yankee merchant; do you know what that means? It means a man who will do anything for money. I know them. *Por Dios!* Estrabon Balasco knows them. Did not some of them in your great war of secession fit out blockade-runners on the sly—for money? Don't lots of them now swindle your government custom houses on valuations of goods, by false invoices—for money?"

This effusion Mastic can hardly deny. As a revenue detective, he knows the sins of Yankee merchants. He, therefore, goes on shortly:

"What reason have you to think that Mr. Vanstone contemplates sending a filibustering expedition to Cuba?"

"These: First, he has in concealment in his house at Emerald Key a Cuban officer, one of Maceo's staff, my information states. Second, there is a hidden supply of arms, ammunition, and dynamite, either on Emerald Key or some island very near it. When the time comes, a gang of these 'patriots' from Key West, the Cuban officer, the concealed arms, and steam yacht will come together, and in ten hours those arms may be in the hands of the enemies of Spain, to shoot my brothers down, to destroy my country. *Santa Maria!* Think of that, *Americano!* Think what it is to see the greatest empire the world has seen, the proudest nation upon earth, trampled in the dust by these traitors."

The Don's eyes are flashing, his gesture excited, his emphasis snarling.

"Very well. What do you wish me to do in the matter?" says the detective grimly, biting off the end of another of Estrabon's peerless Havanas.

"I wish you to take a boat and discover where the hidden depot of arms is located, so that it may be seized. I wish you to also discover who is the Cuban leader at present residing with Mr. Vanstone and his family; if he has already violated American neutrality; so a warrant for his arrest may be issued! You must swear that out yourself. Here is money to provide for your expenses."

"The United States Government is my paymaster," mutters the detective, shortly, declining the proffered gold.

"Ah, of course! You are right. You are in the pay of the Great President. Report to me as soon as possible. Do you think you can do what I wish you?"

"Certainly. I am accustomed to the Florida keys, and know how to travel about 'em," remarks Mastic.

"Can I trust you? So many of your countrymen sympathize with these dogs that would humble Spain. So many *Americanos* hate my country." The first is said eagerly, yet nervously, the last somewhat dejectedly.

"You can rely on me," replies the revenue man, determinedly. "Whatever my sympathies are, I am an officer of the United States Government, and as such will do my duty to the last drop of blood in my body and the last gasp of breath in my gizzard."

"Ah, yes, of course, I can trust an American," says Don Estrabon. "You phlegmatic people never let your emotions overcome your duty."

"Not often," laughs the detective, "but when we do, we're like anthracite—hard to start, but harder to put out."

"Ah, yes. You Yankees are hard—like your coal. But can't I offer you anything more, Señor Mastic?"

"Well, I've got a three days' cruise along the Florida Reefs ahead of me," remarks the officer reflectively, "and if I could make bold, a box of them prime cigars would keep off mosquitoes."

"Ah, of course, certainly! Are they not divine in their flavor?"

With this the Don forces into Mastic's hand a

hundred of his superb weeds, and leads him to the front door.

Here he whispers cautiously:

"Then I can rely on hearing from you very shortly. There is now a revenue cutter in the harbor. The *Raleigh* will be here within three days; she is at present pursuing the accursed *Three Friends*, the vessel she never catches."

"No; I don't think she ever will, as long as Nap Broward is captain of the *Three Friends*," laughs the detective.

"Ah, if we only had that Broward in Havana—a little of the *Virginus* business once more—*eh mi amigo?*"

This last has been a dangerous speech for the Spaniard; Mastic's iron hand has been tightly clinched, and did Don Balasco know it, his dark, flashing eyes have come very near seeing stars and his beautiful excited Latin features have been very close to feeling the revenue officer's fist.

Controlling himself, however, the American says shortly, "In three or four days you will hear from me," turns on his heel, goes down the shell walk to the street, muttering to himself, "No; that wouldn't do. They'd have bounced me from the revenue service if I'd smashed the Don's face. And now, I suppose I have got to do my duty, and put another nail in Cuba's coffin. Hang it! I'd sooner be fitting out filibustering expeditions to help the poor devils, than cutting them off from the arms with which to keep themselves from being butchered." Then he chuckles to himself. "I couldn't help taking the Don's cigars. No smoker could help that, with their 'come-to-heaven'

flavor—but his money—hang me! if I'd grabbed that, I'd have felt as if I was selling the goddess of liberty by the pound."

CHAPTER III.

THE GIRL IN THE SKIFF.

"Now let me consider a little how to do my duty by the U. S.," cogitates the detective.

A moment after he leaves the main street of Key West, and after a tramp through the dusty lanes of the Cuban quarter of the town, finds himself near South Beach. Here he knocks at the door of a house that, despite its surrounding palms, papaws and cocoanut trees, has a somewhat decayed though nautical appearance. Near its portal are several fishing nets and a number of the long poles and hooks used by sponge gatherers.

It is hardly nine o'clock in the evening, and Mastic soon gets answer from an old darky woman, who apparently is the presiding genius of the place.

To her he says: "Aunt Dinah, you remember me?"

"Yas, you'se Massa Moss-Tick."

"Quite right, Auntie. Is Alligator Pete within hail?"

"Golly, Massa Moss-Tick, you'se in luck. Dis af'ernoon, you come and say, 'Where Massa Alligator Pete?' I tell you, 'Hanged if I kno'.' Now I tell you, he come in from Snipe Key in his schooner to-day to buy grub."

Then she raises her voice and cries, "Massa

Alligator Pete, Massa Moss-Tick of de States Gub-
ernment here to see yo'!"

And the answer that comes back is, "Auntie,
ye can tell the Government to come in. I ain't
been smuggling, and I'm tickled to grip Tom
Mastic by the hand."

A moment after the detective finds himself con-
fronted by a thin, weather-beaten individual of in-
definite age, long ago named Peter Smith, but
now generally known as "'Gator Pete."

At present there is but one description that can
be given to him and that is "*dried*." The only
features that have not undergone this process are
his eyes, that are bright, flashing, and steel gray.
This desiccation under the burning sun of Florida
seems to have left nothing but muscle, sinew and
bone, for his form is erect and his step light and
elastic, but somewhat rolling, for Alligator Pete,
though a hunter and trapper of wide-spread re-
nown, is partly amphibious. Descended from one
of the most illustrious "cracker" families of South-
ern Florida—the "shoot-on-the-drop-of-the-hat-
Smiths"—'Gator Pete early in life had turned
his attention to murdering the reptiles from which
he had gained his appellation.

Like a good many of his class, Pete is a nomad;
but for the last few years he has spent his time
sponge-fishing on the Florida reefs, mixed with
occasional ventures in tobacco smuggling. He is
now considered one of the best guides about the
Florida Keys, and in this capacity has been of use
to Mr. Mastic, even assisting him at times in raids
upon the defiers of the United States revenue.
Consequently on several cruises, the two have been

drawn together by the bond of mutual danger and mutual support. Both have learned to know each other as men who can be relied on in tough times and squally waters.

"I am right glad to see you, Pete," remarks the detective.

"That's me also," replies the guide. "Is it business or pleasure?"

"Business," answers the revenue man, shortly. "I want to know—now this is man to man—if you can take me over to some little island near Emerald Key in your schooner, and loaf around there three or four days with me, fishing—and *not see anything but fishing.*"

"Yes. I reckon it can be did," is Pete's reply. Then his face assumes a knowing expression, and he continues: "It's lucky you spoke quick, Mastic, for t'other side were talking to me about next week, and then you see I might ha' been agin ye and the guv'ment."

"Who were talking?" asks the detective, suddenly.

"Wal, that would be tellin'," chuckles the guide. "And my terms will have to be higher this trip, Mastic, though that don't matter to you, as Uncle Sammy pays the reckoning. Ye see, since there's so much dodging round the Keys by filibustering craft and guv'ment revenue cutters, the price of a guide and pilot has bulged up like an alligator h'isting the mud when comin' out of winter quarters."

"The terms will be all right," assents the revenue man, with the easy indifference with which a man always pays out government money.

"Wal, that's settled. Now I'm on your side of the fence, let's shake flippers on it."

As Mastic's hand grips the skinny, bony, dried-up fingers of the guide, he knows that Alligator Pete is, while he receives government pay, dead for the government and dead against any one who would violate its laws, though the cracker would go to smuggling or piloting expeditions, contrary to the neutrality of the United States, within two minutes after he had gone out of its employ.

"Then let's be moving," says the customs officer, hurriedly. "We must get out of here to-night."

"All right; I will have you on board in twenty minutes," answers the alligator killer. Then calling to Auntie to look after the drying of his sponges in the back yard, the guide suggests, "You step up town and get your duds, while I go down to the boat and get things ready for a start. It's fortunate I've just laid in a new stock of canned goods and liquid sustenance from Monsalvatge Brothers, which, of course, under the sarcumstances, the guv'ment settles for."

"Quite right!" answers the officer, and starts hurriedly toward the center of the town, the guide telling him that he will have a lantern in the bow of the skiff that will take him on board.

At his hotel Mastic informs the landlady he has a chance to buy a lot of cheap sponges on one of the keys toward the Dry Tortugas and is going there to-night.

A few minutes after, he is near South Beach again, and being rowed out in a small boat by Alligator Pete, finds himself on the deck of the

sponge-fisherman's schooner, the *Gopher*. This is a little center-board craft of some forty feet long, which has been left in charge of a boy who, under the appellation of the Varmint, acts as first mate, crew, steward, and sometimes cook of the vessel.

"Hallo! Is that you, Varmint?" says Mastic cheerily.

"Hallo yourself, Custom-house!" replies the other, merrily. "What tyranny is the gov'ment up to now?"

"Quit your darned skylarking, Varmint; let that boat tow astern; then help h'ist the mainsail," cries Pete. And this being done they put the foresail on the vessel also. "Now, everybody bear a hand at the windlass and get in the anchor!"

Then the Varmint and Mastic run up the jib, as Pete takes the tiller, and the little vessel is under way, first running south from Key West until she is clear of the reefs, and then steering to the eastward.

"Now you kin turn in if you like, Mastic," remarks the guide. "No good of your staying up. The Varmint and I kin take care of the craft. If I want a pull at the sheets, I'll rouse ye. No, I don't want you to take a hand at the tiller to-night. Ye'd navigate us in this darkness on to a reef before daybreak. I'll sleep to-morrow while the Varmint takes care of the boat, and you do the fishing. What's the fish your after—smugglers or Cubans?"

"That'd be telling, too," laughs the detective, looking for a soft spot of plank.

The night is a perfect one; the deck preferable to the stuffy little cabin.

It does not take long for Mastic to roll up in a pair of blankets and make himself comfortable on the lee deck of the schooner, and sleep the sleep of the blessed. From this he is only aroused once or twice by the skipper, when it is necessary to put the boat about.

The consequence is, that when the revenue man arises the next morning and looks around him he thinks he is in fairyland.

The schooner is anchored just off a little islet, which sits low on the blue water and is green with tropic vegetation.

Farther to the east are the Big and Little Pine Keys, both covered with the trees after which they are named, although even these are intermingled with the flora of the equator.

There are islands—fairy islands—all about them, and the breezes from these ocean oases are perfumed with the breath of fruits and flowers.

To the south is another green islet, perchance not over half a mile in diameter, which is covered with the growing fruit of the tropics. Nestled in its verdure is a great white house, spacious as even some of the country places of the Berkshire Hills. Flower gardens are in bloom all about it. A beautiful shell walk leading from its grounds connects with a pretty little wharf that runs out into the limpid water. To this is attached steps with floating dock for the convenience of boating parties. Little skiffs are moored beside it; farther out is a flat-bottomed catboat, and perhaps one hundred yards from the shore is anchored a white steam yacht, which Mr. Mastic immediately recognizes as the *Flying Fish*.



The Varmint is just making plates, platters, and dishes fly in arranging for a meal on deck. Pete is even now coming out of the cabin, from which the aroma of coffee and the odors of fried fish, flapjacks, eggs, and bacon herald approaching breakfast.

The rising sun is just tinging the eastern waters and making them brilliant, soft, and warm, though tempered with the southern breeze. Altogether, it is as pretty and bright a scene as Mr. Mastic has ever looked upon.

The view seems also to affect Alligator Pete, as he several times shades his eyes with his hand, gazing toward a small, low island about a couple of miles east of them. On it are a few scrub pine trees, surrounded by the usual mangrove and buttonwood growth of the Florida islands.

"What are you looking at so earnestly?" asks Mastic, following the guide's glance.

"I war trying to see what made that light over thar. Hang me if I kin work it out. That key ain't got no inhabitants on it, and yet jist as we anchored this morning I'd swar' I seed a light thar plain as I sees that island now."

"A light there, and no inhabitants?" queries Mastic eagerly. "Suppose we go fishing that way to-day."

"Well, Coral Key's about as good a place as you could pick out," answers the pilot. "It's rather strange it ain't got no inhabitants. It's the best landing place in the islands. A channel runs right alongside of it, and a five-hundred ton vessel could moor agin' its coral rocks as easy as she could agin' a wharf. But navigation don't bother

me just now so much as breakfast. Heave ahead thar, Varmint, with the grub!"

Then they sit down on deck, and over the meal get to discussing their surroundings, Mr. Mastic gaining what information he can about the Vanstones.

"I don't know much about the old gent," says Pete. "All I know is that he must have as much money as the Havana lottery. Darn it, I believe he's got more! He's too rich to drink reg'lar water, he are. They bring it all in bottles tied up with wire to keep it from spilling, it's so darned precious."

"Shucks! that ain't nothin'," remarks the Varmint, anxious to display his knowledge. "They have ice like a bar-room down thar"—he waves his hand toward Emerald Key—"and a freeze place for meat. A nigger sneaked in thar one night to steal and somehow he got locked in. The next morning thar war frozen nigger. You bet the coons don't play round old Vanstone's beef quarters no more; not for peanuts! Besides, with all his money he ain't got no health. I tell you what, thar's been a doc' over dere for the last week."

"A doctor?" queries Mastic, to whom this information is astonishing.

"Yes, a doc'," answers the boy, confidently. "I know it was a doc', because Joe Vance, who ran him over in a tugboat, told me he got ten dollars for every ten minutes he beat three hours in gitting him thar. I reckon that showed the old gent was purty near gone, ready to pay for gaspin's at the rate of a picayune a breath. He must be a pretty ornery cuss, he must."

"Well, Vanstone can't get ahead of these cigars," laughs Mastic, producing a portion of Don Balasco's gift.

"Great Crackie!" says Alligator Pete, lighting up lazily and blowing out the smoke. "These do beat corncob. Where in thunder did you seize them?"

But Mastic's answer is cut short by a yell from the Varmint, who has stepped forward, with the dishes.

"Great snakes!" cries the boy, "A boat 'll be aboard of us in two minutes, and by sharks, she's sailed by a gal! and the most tarnation, all-fired lookin' one I ever seen. Darn me if she isn't rigged as if she war waitin' for de angels."

The guide and Mastic step forward, and their glances following the Varmint's pointing hand, they see something that makes Alligator Pete's eyes grow very big and gives Mastic something to think about.

A light flat-bottomed skiff, peculiarly adapted to the navigation of these shallow waters of Florida Bay, is coming head on to them as fast as the gentle breeze will bring her. In the bow sits a white-headed negro; in the stern about as pretty a specimen of femininity as ever played the mermaid to enchant the heart of man.

"Did ye ever see such a rig before?" remarks the guide. "She's a leetle cuter than the pictures they have on whisky bottles."

But Mastic does not answer him. The boat is now quite near, and astonishment dominates the detective's mind, for the young lady who steers the skiff so dashingly is the girl whose photograph

Don Balasco's delicacy has prevented adorning his cigar-boxes. Only, this flesh-and-blood creature is to her counterfeit presentment as the sun is to the stars.

In a light, floating, snowy, fly-away dress, with three touches of delicate color: one a sash of simmering pinkish satin that outlines her lithe and delicate waist; another, some blush rosebuds in her white leghorn; the third, her cheeks, that are tinted by the bloom of youth, exercise, and health; the girl looks like a Naiad, nay more, a Venus of the waters.

Though at first Mastic does not thoroughly appreciate all her loveliness, for the young lady has charms of manner and subtle graces of mind, intellect, and body that are to him, as yet, unknown—still every moment he gazes at her adds to the effect of the girl's beauty upon him—likewise on Alligator Pete and even the boy Varmint, who gapes at her open-mouthed.

"Look out!" cries the guide, gallantly, for the young lady is now within hail, "or ye'll run us down, Miss!"

"Oh, never fear, Captain," floats over the water, in the bright, laughing tones of girlhood. "I'm enough of a sailor for this. Throw Goliah a rope, and I'll be alongside in a minute."

"Who in thunder is Goliah?" asks Pete, too much absorbed in her beauty to heed the fair one's command.

"I'se Goliah, boss," says the voice of the darky in the bow of the skiff.

This is mingled with feminine entreaty, "Oh, please throw us a rope, *quick!*" next, in delicious,

but disappointed tones, "Oh, you're too late. We shall have to come about."

This the girl does, guiding the skiff with the skill of a fisherman's daughter, and as the boat comes up in the wind she cries, "Won't you *please* throw me a rope?"

This time they obey her and her skiff glides alongside the *Gopher*.

"Ye will excuse me, Miss," says Alligator Pete, taking off his sombrero and making an elaborate bow. "But both me and the Varmint were so occupied with looking at ye we couldn't do nothin' else, the first time ye passed us by."

But the young lady pays no direct attention to the compliment; she merely says, "I am Miss Vanstone. You're Mr. Alligator Pete—are you not?"

"Yes, Miss; and this is Mr. Mastic, and here's my cook, cabin boy, fust mate and crew, the Varmint," chuckles the guide; then says, "Ye won't step on board, will ye, Miss?"

"No, thank you," answers the girl as Mastic does his best at bowing, and the Varmint, having no cap to take off, pulls his forelock and titters. Then she goes on, a curious trace of nervous hesitation in her liquid voice that makes the detective wonder: "I've—I've come to buy fish for breakfast. You're—you're fishermen, I believe."

"Fishermen be darned!" ejaculates the Varmint, who is apparently anxious to get into the conversation.

"Sonny!" remarks his captain, in a smooth but suggestive tone, "Walk for'ard like a streak of lightning and keep your jaws clapped together tighter than a calked seam."

To this Mastic adds, "We ain't fishermen, Miss, but if ye want fish for breakfast, if that nigger of yours is worth his salt he can catch a mess of pompano any morning in twenty minutes off that p'int."

"Stay, we'll do it for ye," says Alligator Pete, anxious to please beauty.

But just at this moment the Varmint, eager to be of service also, cries, "Hurry, Custom-house, haul that boat for'ard!"

The effect of "Custom-house" on the girl is instantaneous. The roses leave her cheeks, she grows suddenly pale, and a curious, anxious expression comes into her beautiful eyes. She stammers, "You—you are a revenue officer?"

"Yes, Miss," replies Mastic, cursing under his breath the boy whose words have told his tale to one of the family upon whom he has come to spy. "A United States customs officer looking for smugglers."

"A—ah! That being the case," says the young lady, "I'll not take you from your duty and the—the smugglers." Then she cries, "Goliah, let go the line!" and the boat flashes over the rippling water, bearing what seems to Alligator Pete a day dream away from him.

As for Mastic, the instinct of the detective tells him this beautiful creature for some unknown reason fears the United States revenue department. He ponders "Why?"

But his reveries are broken in upon by screams, howls, yells, and shrieks from the unfortunate Varmint, who is dancing a schottische under the rope's end.

"I'll teach ye to open your —— jaws when I told you to keep 'em shut, you whelp. Every time ye opened that souse pot of yers ye scared that top knot of creation. Than, darn ye, ye gave the detective away. Didn't I tell ye this was to be a sneak cruise?"

But if the Varmint's voice drove Miss Vanstone away, it also brings her back. Mastic sees her boat hastily come about, and before the boy has finished his dance and stopped his music the girl is once more near the schooner. Her eyes flash indignation, and she cries: "For what are you beating that poor boy?"

"Shucks, 'tain't nothin' but a leetle rope's ending I war givin' the Varmint for not obeying orders. Got to have discipline on shipboard," mutters Alligator Pete, who is a kind-hearted man, but a captain who will be obeyed. "I war only doing it fur the boy's good," he adds in a shamefaced sort of way.

"No; it wasn't for his good! Don't tell me that, Alligator Pete," says the girl excitedly. "It was because he told me Mr. Mastic was a United States Revenue officer in pusuit of smugglers. Then she falters these curious words: "This—this proves to me what—what I feared." Indignation now comes into her voice, she adds: "You, Mr. Officer, are here to seek Cuban sympathizers—come to me to-day at eleven o'clock and I will show you one."

"Ye don't quite understand me, Miss," mumbles the detective.

But the girl only answers commandingly: "Come—it is your duty—COME!"

Then, with dainty hand, she holds out something to the sufferer, who is still rubbing his legs and emitting subdued sniffs, and says, "Poor Varmint—poor, friendless ship boy—here's something to make you laugh when you get a cruise on shore."

"Oh, snakes and 'gators!" screams the boy, "I'm set up for life. It's—it's——" Then he calls after her, "Ye've made a mistake. Ye've busted yourself, Miss. This ain't no dollar note!"

But the boat keeps on her course, though the girl, shaking her sunny curls, looks back at him and smiles—leaving the Varmint with tears of joy, gratitude, and love in his eyes, gazing at a twenty dollar bill, which seems to him almost the wealth of a Rothschild, and for which one day he will pay interest greater than ever Shylock dreamed of—in things that affect life and death to those blue eyes, when hope has left them and despair has entered into them, and this fair earth seems peopled with the fiends of hell.

"Ye'se made a strike, Varmint, for which I'd take the whaling I've give ye myself. But as it hurts her feelings, I'll promise not to larrup ye agin this cruise if ye'll half behave," says Pete, in a shamefaced, kindly tone. Then he turns to Mastic and asks: "I suppose y'r going to see Miss Highflyer at eleven?"

"Sartin!" replies the detective, "If I have to handcuff her daddy. Both because it's my duty and because she's the prettiest thing I ever looked on, and I've been to Kentucky horse fairs!"

Then he gets to wondering if old Vanstone is really fitting out filibustering expeditions, and

what this lovely girl of fashion and refinement has to do with such affairs, anyway.

But when man is concerned, even girls of fashion and refinement sometimes find a place in very curious transactions.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DRIFTING BOAT FROM CUBA.

THE revenue man, whatever may be his opinion about the interview, apparently is determined to make a good impression upon the young lady who has summoned him to it.

In the cabin of the *Gopher* Mr. Mastic shakes the dust of ages out of his clothes and even attempts to shave such portions of his face as are not adorned by his full beard and long mustache. Then he rumages in the gripsack he has brought with him from Tampa, and proceeds to make what is, for him, such an elaborate toilet that it produces jeering comment from the Varmint on the deck above.

"Hang me, Pete!" cries the boy, gazing down with grinning face at Mastic's preparations. "Hang me, if Custom-house isn't puttin' on a biled shirt and a red speckled necktie. And now—Golly! He's histing on his guv'ment cap."

When Mr. Mastic steps on the deck of the *Gopher* he proves the Varmint's inspection has been correct, for he has given himself as civilized and official an appearance as is possible under the circumstances.

"By chipmunks!" remarks Alligator Pete, as

he rows the government man toward Emerald Key. "One would think ye were sparking, Mastic, instead of going to raise the devil with that gal's daddy." For the two have been discussing the matter and have half-way formed the opinion that old Vanstone must be in the filibustering business.

"Darn me if I don't think I've hit it," remarks Mastic. "The old man's going to Cuba himself to land his shipments of arms, and the gal's afeard the Dons will catch him and garrote him; so she's going to use me to stop him."

"Shouldn't wonder if ye'd struck it," rejoins Pete. "Any way, the gal seems to be as anxious about the matter as ye are. See, she's come down to meet yer." And he points to Miss Indra Vanstone, who, forming an alluring picture, is standing upon the wharf that runs out from Emerald Key, apparently awaiting their coming.

The spot where the girl is posed is a pretty structure which, built on piles, runs out from the land to a sufficient depth of water to permit the *Flying Fish*, if necessary, to run alongside of it, thus avoiding the inconvenience of boat-connection with the sea-going yacht. Its planking leads directly to a wide shell walk which, passing through gardens of blooming flowers, goes up to the portico of the great white house. Behind it, amid the cocoanuts, bananas, paw-paws, sugar-apples, and sapadillos, are two pretty structures built after the pagoda style, one of which is quite large and is used as a billiard-room and bowling alley; the other is the stable, which, in curious contrast to the size of

the mansion, is extraordinarily small—horses being of little use on the Florida Keys.

As the skiff passes her, the girl, who is still in the light, float-away summer costume of the early morning, though she has added to it a white silk sunshade, waves her greeting to them and calls out graciously, "Thank you for keeping your appointment, Mr. Mastic."

A moment after, the detective, stepping on the light float, runs up the little steps that lead to the wharf, and is greeted in a manner, as he expresses it, that takes him out of his boots. For the young lady brings immediately to bear upon the revenue man all the charms of gracious manner and unaffected, spontaneous girlish fascination—articles of which Miss Indra Vanstone has very many in her dazzling personality and vivacious mind.

"It is very nice of you to come at my request," she remarks, extending an exquisitely gloved hand of welcome.

"I'm at yer service," replies the detective gallantly, giving the pretty digits a hearty grip that almost makes the young lady wince.

But she goes on, saying pleasantly, "Come with me to the house," and leads her guest through a scene of beauty that makes him remark, "This takes me to the Tampa Bay Hotel and the Ponce de Leon, only it's condensed." For the grounds about the villa are exquisitely kept and of great tropical beauty, and the click of balls from the pagoda billiard-room, where Rex is practicing fancy shots, brings modern, every-day American life in touch with southern solitude.

As she walks by his side, the girl startles Mastic by this astounding speech: "You would think these islands were a land of rest, quiet, *peace!*" Indra waves a dainty hand over the charming landscape, rippling waters and snow-white yacht resting lightly on the languid swell which scarcely moves the graceful vessel; then goes on bitterly, "So it would be, were it not for the war of murder and extermination going on only a short hundred miles across the Gulf Stream, from which drifts to us some of its misery, despair, and blood."

The detective makes no answer to this, only opens his eyes, astonished, for the girl's manner is vehement, excited. A moment after, apparently conquering her emotions, Miss Vanstone continues: "Papa thought it best to leave the whole affair in my hands," then adds, with a delightful *moue*, "You know, nearly everybody lets me have my own way."

"I reckon ye're about right on that p'int," says the officer, with an affirmative chuckle. "The man who could say no to you wouldn't be fit to be an Indian."

"I'm glad you think so," replies the young lady, and her eyes tell the same tale, as she continues, "Let us step into the house, where"—there is a little tremor in her voice now—"where I have something to tell you. After that, papa will offer you the hospitality of Cocoanut Grove."

"I am very glad to hear that," returns Mastic, "because"—here he goes on uneasily—"I was afraid it might be a case of handcuffs."

"Handcuffs! Handcuffs for a wounded man?"

That—that would be too cruel—too horrible!” falters the girl, a tremor of what the detective thinks is fear running through her beautiful face and willowy figure. Then her pose grows commanding, her eyes flaming and indignant; she says imperiously, “Come into the house and SEE!” for by this time they are near the great porticoes of the villa.

A moment after they stand upon its broad veranda, and Mastic discovers that Mr. Vanstone’s residence is built in true southern style. All around it, save at its back, is an enormous veranda. Through its center runs a hallway from which its large, airy rooms open to right and left. A broad staircase leads to the second, which is the top story, the rooms of which likewise connect with another wide passage that runs from end to end of the mansion. French windows give all the rooms on the lower floor easy access to the veranda. The house is furnished in light wickerware; its floors are of hardwood, covered with rugs. The comforts of the tropics are mingled with the graces of the temperate zone.

As Mastic enters, every window seems to be open, and the breeze, which has now become very languid, though still refreshing, bears with it the perfumes of growing pineapple and blossoming shrubs and flowers.

But the young lady does not give him much time for inspection; apparently she is eager to come to the point of a matter which bears upon her young mind. She says earnestly, after a moment’s pause of thought: “Upstairs in my boudoir, I can tell you my story better, and can

show you what will make you ashamed of your errand here."

"I—I don't quite understand you, Miss," stammers Mastic, as he follows Indra up the broad oaken stairway. Then passing along a hallway, made graceful by growing flowers and palms in ornamental jardinières, she throws open the door leading to an exquisitely furnished lady's sitting-room, and remarks, "Step in, please."

A moment after, confronting the detective, the young lady suddenly falters out, "Please forgive those last words of mine. Your coming has made me very anxious, very nervous. Sit down; don't interrupt me; let me tell it all to you. Then do your duty; only remember you have a heart in your body—a good heart. Thank Heaven, I can see you have a good heart!"

"Well, Miss, I'm here to listen to you," replies Mastic, somewhat astonished and decidedly impressed by this peroration, which is given with excited face and agitated but exquisite gesticulation.

With this the government man drops into a low, luxurious chair, and Indra Vanstone, her soul in her eyes, speaks unto him these words:

"Since I came to these tropic islands, two weeks ago, I have occupied myself sailing over these beautiful waters—that should be peaceful, but are not—piloted by the negro Goliah, who is devoted to me and knows every key from here to Biscayne. On one day last week we had been on an expedition to Big Pine Key over yonder, for oysters or fish. I forget which, but it is of no moment. On our return, the head wind made it

convenient to beat out a short distance into the Gulf Stream. The day was fine, the water smooth, though a sharp southwest breeze was blowing. A mile or two outside of Pine Key I was just putting the skiff about, when a cry from Goliah, who has the eyes of an eagle, caused me to use my eyes also. I thought I saw a piece of driftwood, a log—one of those huge trees that sometimes are borne out from the great tropical rivers into this wonderful stream of water that runs between us and Cuba. I would have paid no attention to it, but Goliah declared it was a boat—a drifting boat.

“A suspicion that it might be from some wrecked ship, that I might be of service to some helpless sailors, made me keep my skiff on its course, though it took me five or six miles into the open water—further than it was safe for my little craft to go. But the day was fair; there was not a squall-cloud in the heavens, and I was anxious to help the shipwrecked.

“Half an hour’s run brought me near to the boat. I could see it had suffered disaster of some kind. Its little mast and tiny sail had been partly blown away by a gale. Apparently it was drifting before a southern wind, diagonally across the current of the Gulf Stream from the direction of the Cuban coast. A moment after I peered over its gunwale.

“If God lets me live one hundred years, Mr. Mastic, I shall never forget that sight. I had half expected suffering, starvation, but I did not dream of blood. Three dead men lay upon the thwarts of the boat; not in the death of shipwreck, but the death of war or murder. Their blood had flowed

out of their bodies from bullet and machete wounds. Another—a living man, wounded also, but still breathing—was extended in the stern sheets. I could not do it, but Goliah made the examination and lifted into my skiff the wounded man. We took the boat in tow, the dead men in it, the living one lying beside me; I pouring water between his pale lips and trying to revive him. But he only muttered awful words, sometimes in English, sometimes Spanish. He was in what might be the semi-uniform of a Cuban officer. The words he faltered in delirium made me know he was not Spanish, though I would have ministered to one of them just the same.

“Two hours afterward my skiff was beside our wharf. Goliah carried the wounded man to our house. Our servants buried the dead beneath those cocoanut trees”—the girl points through the open window and murmurs: “Over them I have had placed a cross.

“Fortunately, a tugboat was here with a cargo of coal for the yacht. This boat had steam up, and within six hours, under my father’s orders, brought from Key West a friend of ours, a celebrated northern physician who chanced to be spending a few days there. By his skillful hand the bullet was extracted. By my nursing and that of my sister—for since her arrival she has assisted me—the waif I stole from the sea and the shambles has, this morning, I am told, a chance of life. Do you suppose I’m going to let you, by persecuting or arresting him under orders from our government, destroy that chance? That is what you came here to do. I knew it by your manner

when you discovered that I knew you were a revenue officer."

"Ye're mistaken, Miss Vanstone," replies the detective, with a deprecating wave of his hand, for the girl's tone is reproachful and her manner defiant. "The United States Treasury Department only prosecutes men who are violating the neutrality of this country by going to Cuba, not coming away from it."

"Nonsense!" answers Indra, excitedly. "Don't I know that they have prosecuted officers who have returned from Cuba for—for previously having fitted out expeditions? The Spanish consuls make affidavits, the Treasury Department prosecutes them, but, thank God, no American jury has ever convicted on them. Don't I see, night after night, your revenue cutters flitting about these keys? Who are they in pursuit of? Men who would go to fight for the liberty of their native island. Have I not watched at night the dark smoke of the *Raleigh* as she cruises up and down the ocean there to prevent arms reaching a people to save them from butchery? Has not the United States Government prevented a dozen expeditions going to that island where the Spaniards have stayed one? Don't talk to me!" cries the generous girl, in excited voice. "I know how well the government at Washington loves Cuba."

"Nevertheless," says the detective affably, "my mission here is only to intercept and head off parties sailing to the island. The wounded man you speak of is perfectly safe from me. Besides, I will be plain with you, because I know you're not the kind to give a man away and get his head cut off.

Four-fifths of the government officials down here only do what they are told because they have no choice in the matter. They sympathize with the Cubans just as much as you do."

"Yes, and you, as I look on you, are one of them," says the girl, extending her hand eagerly and getting in return another grip that makes her wince.

Then the revenue man goes on: "Perhaps I—if you could tell me who this wounded man is—could find out if there's any likelihood of a warrant being sworn against him by the Spanish consul in Key West, or any trouble coming to him, and give you a hint in time."

"I do not know his name," answers Indra. "We searched his uniform, which was but a mass of rags, mud, and blood," she adds with a shudder. "The one or two scraps of memoranda we found only hinted to us he was either on the staff of Maceo or served under that Cuban leader."

"But the words of his delirium—did not they give any clue?"

Even as the detective speaks, from the next room rings a cry.

"Would that give you a clue?" whispers the girl with white lips, as to Mastic's ears come screams, shrieks, and ravings that make his blood run cold—they hint such awful things.

"*Cuba Libre! Al machete!* To save the wounded!" is the cry, given like an officer rallying his men. Then the voice grows pleading, piteous, horrified in its tones, as it shrieks, "*Santa Maria!* Don't knife the sick! Devils! Fiends! You are macheting the doctor and the nurses!" Then

the voice goes into a sob. "*Madre de Dios*, they have massacred the hospital!"

"That's what makes me know he is Cuban," says the girl sternly. "Do Cubans massacre hospitals? Read the newspapers of the United States and see who kill the wounded in their cots, and knife those wearing the red cross of Geneva who attend to them! Did you hear him? He said they were macheting the surgeon whose ministering hands were soothing the sick and the dying. It is these cries that I have shuddered at night after night that have made me a hater of Spain. Two weeks ago I was indifferent, careless. What did it matter to me? But now Cuba has another friend."

A moment after Indra says, less passionately, "He will be quieter now. His ravings come less often, but his voice is stronger. The doctor thinks it is a good sign—that of returning vitality. Would you like to step in and see him? Perhaps you may know who he is. He may have lived in Key West at some time. You can come in with perfect safety to him; he knows nobody."

"With your permission I'll take a look at him," remarks the detective. Opening a door the young lady leads Mr. Mastic into a large, airy room, exquisitely furnished, where, attended by a gentleman whose profession is evidently that of a physician, and a juvenile nurse that Mastic immediately recognizes as the Gertie of his journey from Tampa, a young man is lying amid luxurious linen and lace-trimmed pillows.

The doctor holds up a warning hand and whispers: "Tread softly, please. I have administered

a narcotic. I think he will go to sleep again. You need not fear taking a look at him. He would not know you; I only wish he would."

Mastic steps beside the pillows, and sees a young man of twenty-seven or eight, whose face, notwithstanding sickness, is still bronzed by continuous exposure to a burning sun. The features would be handsome were they not pinched with suffering and privation and somewhat disfigured by a machete slash on the forehead, now partially healed. His eyes are closed. A moment after they open and look anxiously around, but apparently noting nothing, close again.

Coming from the room, the officer whispers to Miss Vanstone: "I'm glad you let me see him. You need have no fear now of any molestation from the American government or Spanish consul under any pretext. The wounded gentleman is a Cuban. I have seen him a dozen times in Key West, where he has friends. His name is——" The revenue man hesitates, thinks for a moment, then says decidedly, "Ramon Varona."

"You're sure of that?"

"Certain! I have seen him often with Don Balasco, the cigar manufacturer." Here Mastic stops, thinking perhaps he has been too frank.

But his hesitancy is not heeded. Indra Vanstone has flown into the sickroom, saying excitedly, "Gertie, I know his name. It is Ramon Varona."

"Ramon Varona?" echoes Gertrude. "What a lovely name; Ramon Varona!"

And the young man rises up in bed and cries at them:

"Yes, Ramon Varona, Lieutenant of Bandera's

Brigade, guarding a concealed hospital six miles west of Cabañas." Then with astonished eyes the invalid gazes about the room and mutters: "*Dios mio!* Where am I? I was in an open boat, but ——" Here his voice becomes languid, "I'm sleepy. I would rest," and his head falls back on the pillow.

And the doctor, bending over him, whispers, "Asleep, thank God!" then mutters grimly: "That was a narrow squeak for life." Next he takes the young ladies, each by an arm, leads them out of the room, and closing the door, says: "What the devil do you mean by daring to come in and cry out his name in the ears of my patient? By the blessing of God and good luck you didn't kill him; only brought him to his senses. You are fine nurses, you are. You are discharged from the hospital; you don't play the red-cross-of-Geneva racket in that sick-room again!"

"Oh, Dr. Granite," pleads Gertie. "He's going to get well; don't keep me out *now!* You said I had nearly saved Ramon. Besides he's going to be so handsome when he gets fat and well."

As for the elder girl, she says: "You are right. I forgot myself in the excitement of knowing who Lieutenant Varona was. Dr. Granite, I apologize and will do anything you tell me. Even you will admit, with this exception, I have done my duty."

"Yes, like an angel," mutters old Granite, with a tear in his eye. "Run along, both of you; I will consider your cases, unless the fellow grows too deuced handsome, with those dark eyes and drooping mustache. Now, you had better both go down to lunch. That chap in there will sleep

for a few hours now, and when he wakes I think he will be on the road to recovery."

"You'll come and join us, won't you, at lunch, Mr. Mastic?" remarks Indra, cordially. "I know papa would like to see you. He pooh-poohed the idea of your having any warrant, and my father is a gentleman who always likes to know he is right."

CHAPTER V.

BEAUTY'S PHOTOGRAPH.

THEN Dr. Granite returns to the chamber of the sick man, and the two young ladies and Mr. Mastic stroll down to the dining-room of the house, where that officer encounters a meal such as only a rich man can give in one of the out-of-the-way places of the world.

It is a repast where climate has been defied and every comfort, nay, luxury, has been brought with the careless prodigality of Dives to this tropical island in the southern seas. The table is beautified and made dainty by flowers, and gorgeous by cut glass, massive silver, and delicately painted china. Its linen is of snow. Its service is impressive, as performed by an imported flunkey butler from New York, and second man; "but it is 'the grub,' as the detective expresses it in his mind, that 'takes my persimmon.'"

Of course, there is everything that pertains to the island: just-out-of-the-water fish, just-off-the-tree fruit, and vegetables that have been gathered for the meal. But the beefsteak Mastic sets teeth into has come from the best butcher in New York,

and has been stored for a week in the chill-room of the great ice-house that is shaded by the cocoanut trees. Delicate French pancakes, with delicious French preserves, tickle his palate. Clysmic and Apollinaris, served in fragile cut-glass, take the place at this table of luxury of the spring water of these Florida keys, which at times is somewhat brackish, slightly sulphury, and by no means palatable. Light wines of rich bouquet are also at Mr. Mastic's hand and in his mouth, likewise liqueurs, and even brandy and whisky, he having expressed preference for the same, come to him after his cup of Mocha.

The conversation of the young ladies is bright, piquant, and charming, and any austerity of manner that the detective has thought necessary for his official importance, passes away under the smiles of beneficent beauty, for Indra and her sister seem to take delight in heaping the good things of this world upon the plate of the man who has removed from them all thought of menace to the wounded officer who has become, under the ministering hands of these two self-appointed votaries of the Geneva Cross, something to be guarded—aye, even, perchance, to be loved. For woman loves most that for which she cares, that which she nurses, that for which she makes sacrifice.

It is in the midst of this meal of Lucullus, which is going along very merrily, Mr. Mastic telling some of his funniest stories of the revenue service, and the young ladies prattling to him of the glories of the New York Horse Show—for Mastic is a born Kentuckian, and as such, of course, loves the prod-

uct and the pet of the Blue Grass region—that the master of the house and father of his two pretty hostesses enters.

He is a handsome man of about fifty, with sharp, shrewd eyes, kindly expression, and genial manner. Having practically retired from business, Mr. Vanstone has taken to the delights of horticulture, and has just come in from his growing pineapples, accompanied by Rex, who has grown hungry over the billiard-table.

The happy hospitality of this northern gentleman, places the detective at his ease at once. He gives his host a grasp of friendship, also affably remarking to Rex: "I saw you, sonny, with your sister, on the voyage from Tampa down."

"Oh, yes, I remember you," remarks the boy pleasantly and turns his attention to what the butler has placed in front of him; while Indra hastily explains to her father that Mr. Mastic has no intention of arresting the sick man upstairs, telling him the story of the recognition, and that Dr. Granite now thinks their charge will get well.

"So the young chap's name is Varona, is it," remarks Vanstone *père*. Then he chuckles, "Didn't I tell you that the United States Government would not trouble him? But you have been so anxious about that young fellow, Indra, you captured in the Gulf Stream, one would think you were spoony on him."

"What! spoony on any one but our Billy?" cries Gertie, indignantly.

"Oh, that would be *too* hard lines on Severance," observes Rex, with a grin.

But here Mr. Vanstone's face assumes a serious

expression, and he mutters something like "Infernal scoundrel!" then turning to the boy, he adds sternly: "You will please not mention Mr. Severance again. He—he has behaved very badly."

"Not at all, papa," interjects Indra, her face flaming with embarrassment; "Mr. Severance has done exactly what I told him." Then the generous nature of the girl making her for a moment forget, she says enthusiastically, "I cannot permit you to do injustice to a gentleman who is absent, but who has treated me better than I deserved." Here, chancing to catch Mastic's eye, the girl bites her lip suddenly, and adds: "But I don't think there is any need of discussing the affair further at present," and rising from the table, strolls out on the veranda and looks wistfully over the soft waters toward the North, as if she hoped that some one might come from there; a habit this young lady has got into ever since she came to the Florida Keys.

A few minutes after Mr. Mastic stands beside her, Miss Gertie in his company.

"You'll excuse me, Miss," says the detective, "but you see I must be going. Alligator Pete and I are to take a look about these islands for hidden arms. You know I must do my duty by the government, though that young chap up there has nothing to fear—from me." Then he goes on, pointing to Coral Key, in the direction of which Indra is still gazing, and carelessly questions "You don't know if that island is inhabited, do you, Miss Vanstone?"

"I'm sure it is not," answers the young lady,

decidedly. "I have sailed around it a dozen times. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Alligator Pete thought he saw a light over there this morning."

"Oh, then it must have been a camping party or wreckers or sponge-fishermen," remarks Indra. "And you, I presume, thought it might be filibusters. What a suspicious man you must be!" Then she laughs, "I suppose, though, that is part of your profession."

"Yes," cries Gertie, effusively, "he is the best detective I ever saw. He is the Vidocq of the Florida Keys, and he's going to help us with our patient."

"And on that subject I must speak to you," returns Indra, smiling at Gertie's unwittingly uncomplimentary metaphor. "But you're in a hurry? We will walk down with you to your boat; on the way I can tell you."

"Then, with your permission, I'll—I'll light up," suggests Mastic. "If you don't mind," he adds, deferentially.

"Not at all," answers the young lady; then she goes on vivaciously, "I have been educated to smoke. Rex, papa, and our——" She checks herself quickly and cries: "Gertie, run and get some cigars for Mr. Mastic."

"Thanks, yer dad offered me one, but I induced him to try one of mine. He'll be shouting about that cigar, in about a minute," chuckles Mastic, producing one of Don Balasco's exquisite *Imperiales*.

Proof of this now comes from the smoking-room in Vanstone *père's* enthusiastic voice, "By

Jove, Mr. Mastic, where did you get this weed?" And the head of the house makes his appearance, blue wreaths floating about him and the joy of the smoker in his eye. "This cigar," he goes on, "is the finest I ever put between my lips." Then he looks at the revenue man smilingly, and suggests, "Where did you confiscate it?"

"Those didn't come to me in the way of business," returns Mastic, grinning, "but if you will apply to Don Balasco of Key West, perhaps he will be able to accommodate you with some of them."

"Ah, yes! Don Estrabon is the gentleman who acted as agent for the parties from whom I purchased this property," replies the New Yorker.

"The great cigarmaker and Cuban patriot!" remarks Indra; then adds, "I have never seen him." At which Mastic gives another and more pronounced chuckle.

"But *I* have," cries Gertie, excitedly. "He is dark, romantic, picturesque, Spanish, patent-leather boots, red sash, Panama hat, and tropical. He said he might come over and see us. He would put romance into this island."

"Yes; he has done me quite a number of favors," observes Mr. Vanstone. "I have asked him to visit us. He is a gentleman who will make it interesting for Rex and me at billiards. I have played a few games with him in Key West. But, you're going, Mr. Mastic? I am much obliged to you for relieving my daughter's mind in regard to her patient, and shall be happy to see you at any time you may be sailing this way."

Then the detective takes his way to the boat, Miss Indra walking beside him, and Gertie, in the

playful ease of short skirts, frisking ahead of him, and making a very pretty show of herself in white muslin, straw hat, floating ribbons, and childhood just changing to womanhood.

"*À propos* of Señor Balasco," suggests Indra, "he is the gentleman you said knew Lieutenant Ramon Varona. You are going to Key West soon?"

"Yes; I calculate on being there within twenty-four hours."

"Then, would you be kind enough to tell Don Balasco the mishap that has come to his wounded friend. Don Estrabon is a true Cuban patriot, I know. As such, perhaps it would be better if you asked him if he could run over and see this wounded lieutenant of Maceo. He may do for him things that we could not do."

Then how Mastic's tongue itches to tell the fair creature walking by his side the truth about the putative lover of *Cuba Libre*. But it is a professional secret, and as such he buries it in his breast; reasoning, "I would be surely bounced for blabbing, and they would mob, perhaps murder, the Don in Key West, as certain as he wears patent leathers."

"You will ask Señor Balasco to visit us," requests the young lady as they approach the wharf.

"Yes; if you wish it," replies Mastic, slowly, a grin running over his countenance as he cogitates: "This meeting with the beauty at my side will be an eye-opener to his Spanish nibs."

"Thank you," says Indra. "You have relieved my mind about that young Cuban, and—Good—

bye." She offers him her hand, for they are at the wharf, which now looks animated. A boat from the *Flying Fish* is by its side getting a supply of vegetables. Goliah is on the landing stage, gossiping with the alligator slayer.

"Yours to command, Miss," replies Mastic, and goes down the steps to the little float, where Gertie, ahead of him, is interviewing the guide.

"Indra!" cries the girl excitedly, "this is Alligator Pete, who is so celebrated. Goliah says he has killed more 'gators than any man in the world."

"That ain't quite the truth, Miss," remarks Pete, grinning. "Alligator Pratt, my old pardner, he killed more'n I ever drew bead on. 'Gators were thicker in them days."

"Well, you're the best alligator slayer living, any way," replies Gertie, who will not be robbed of her hero. "Goliah, I hope you gave Alligator Pete a good lunch and plenty to drink."

"Yes," replies the guide, "Goliah did the squar' thing by me. I'm full to the brim."

A moment later the boat shoves off, the young ladies making a pretty picture as they wave their adieux from the end of the wharf.

"This is delightful!" says Gertie, enthusiastically. "Don Balasco, the romantic Cuban patriot, will come over to visit Ramon Varona, the Cuban hero." Then she laughs the careless laugh of girlhood, and cries, "One for you, and one for me!" but does not know what she has prophesied.

"Stop talking nonsense, Gertie," says her sister severely, walking toward the house.

On the veranda Indra's eyes get looking again to the northward, anguish comes into her fair face,

and she murmurs, "I had happiness, was not that enough?"

"Oh, I know what you're thinking about," whispers Gertie, who has run up the steps after her. "When you look that way you're thinking of our Billy. Why,—you're—you're crying, Indra!"

"Nonsense!" says Miss Vanstone, sternly; then adds severely: "Don't be foolish, Gertrude, or I shall not let you nurse my patient any more."

"*Your* patient!" screams the young girl. "*My* patient! Haven't I given him four times as much medicine as you to-day? I don't care if you did fish Ramon out of the Gulf Stream. *My* patient!"

The next morning Miss Indra Vanstone gazes out over the same quiet water, as she opens the blinds of her pretty room. "The schooner has disappeared," she says to herself. "I suppose by this time Mr. Mastic is in Key West, and to-morrow or the day after we may expect Don Balasco," then adds carelessly: "Perhaps Mr. Mastic may not deliver the message. Perhaps the Cuban may be too busy. It does not make much difference to me."

Perchance Miss Vanstone would not be so indifferent if she could but hear the conversation that takes place at the house of the gentleman she speaks of in Key West, thirty miles away, this bright spring morning.

It is in Balasco's dining-room. The detective has come from his schooner cautiously to the house. They are both sitting over the breakfast table, Mastic smoking one of the Don's famous cigars.

"This is all you have to say?" remarks Estrabon, disappointedly. "You found no hidden arms on Emerald Key or any of the islands near it?"

"No, Pete and I hunted most of yesterday afternoon and some of last night, and not a vestige could we find of anything suspicious in the neighborhood."

"And the young lady, Miss Indra Vanstone, is very anxious about her wounded Cuban rebel she picked up adrift in the Gulf Stream?" queries the Don. Then he laughs: "Is it a case of love at first sight with the young lady?"

"Not with her," chuckles Mastic. "But I think the younger one—Miss Gertie—has took a shine to young Ramon Varona—she's a-nursing him. You should have seen her get me off on one side—all on the sly—no one guessing—and plead to me not to arrest one so noble—so patriotic—so brave. A chicken-love always gets to my heart."

"O ho! *Diantre!* The leetle *muchachita* is in love. Ha-ha! It es funny. What does ze beautiful Mees Indra say to her young sister—ze child in short skirts—playing ze fool with ze wounded rebel?" laughs Estrabon, in his amusement, omitting a portion of his English accent.

"Oh, Miss Indra don't say nothing, I reckon," remarks the detective, taking a philosophical whiff or two of his cigar, as he thinks of the surprise in store for Don Balasco. "They're teasing her about a young fellow she sent away; one they call 'Our Billy.'"

"One they call 'Our Billy'?" echoes the Don, laughing, "*Que aburricion!* Mr. Vanstone has a romantic family." Then he adds, rising, as if to end

the interview, "I do not think I shall go over to see this wounded Cuban. I know Ramon Varona slightly, and have no enmity against him, more than I should have to any who would destroy and humiliate my country. To visit Mr. Vanstone's now I should have to play the part of Cuban patriot—a *rôle* that is already fatiguing to me."

"Nevertheless, I'll bet you'll go!"

"What will take me there?"

"Curiosity."

"Curiosity? Bah! I have it not in my disposition. Curiosity for the young Cuban?"

"Yes; curiosity, or something else," remarks Mastic, suggestively. Then he adds: "Do you think you would give me one hundred more of those come-to-heaven cigars if I could tell you where you would find the reality of that colored photograph in your parlor?"

"Her name?" This is said very eagerly.

"Is it the hundred cigars?"

"Certainly! Her name?" The Spaniard's eyes flash.

"Indra Vanstone!"

"You—you are sure?" stammers the Don. Then he runs out of the dining-room, to return, bringing the lovely picture, and murmurs, his eyes lighting up as they gaze upon it. "Tell me. You are sure this is she?"

"Certain! Only she knocks that photo silly."

"More beautiful than this? Impossible!"

"Just as much purtier as flesh and blood is sweeter than paper and paint."

"*Dios mio!*" murmurs Balasco, eyeing the pic-



ture greedily. "I—I think I will go over; but it is not curiosity. I have concluded upon reflection, that there must be hidden arms near Emerald Key; these I shall search for myself. But I also wish your assistance. I will telegraph your superior for further orders for you."

"As you please," assents Mastic. "This is a full box, I reckon," and he selects a package of the cigars that have enchanted him, from the sideboard. "You'll find me on board Pete's schooner, at South Beach. Thank you, I will take just another weed." Lighting this, he strolls out, but on the doorstep, after a reflective puff or two, he chuckles, *sotto voce*, "Great snakes! Did I see his eyes? The *hidalgo's* busted all up on that photo. He'll be a snorter for love. Perhaps I've put a new peg into the Don's life."

But Mastic would hardly grin so merrily did he know what a curious peg he had just put into his own life.

The detective's guess is, however, true.

Even now Estrabon is holding the picture up to the light, gazing at it, and murmuring, "How beautiful! *Santa Maria!* Shall I see her in flesh and blood? this image that has produced in me more sentiment, more passion, than ever came to me from flesh and blood?"

BOOK II.

FASHION IN THE TROPICS.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COMING OF THE HIDALGO.

THE sea-breeze is still blowing, on the afternoon following his interview with the detective, as Balasco's steam-launch, the *Figaro*, steered by his darky helmsman, glides to the little landing float beside the pretty wharf at Emerald Key.

The boat is scarcely tied up, before its owner, in the costume of a tropical dandy, with flashing patent leathers, the very whitest of flannel suits, most flaming of sashes, linen immaculate, *sombrero de Guayaquil* woven of most delicate equatorial grasses, steps hastily from his little cabin, and rapidly up the steps that lead from the landing, to take route through the beautiful gardens to the Vanstone residence.

As he walks he murmurs to himself, a slight tremble on his delicate lip: "I shall see her! The photograph will live to me; those blue eyes will shine to me; those coral lips will speak to me."

Once, however, Estrabon hesitates and sneers: "I suppose it will be a disenchantment. Perhaps even the detective may have been mistaken. Did

not I try to discover, by letters to New York, who the lady was—without effect? The photograph is but a proof, not even stamped with the artist's name."

Suddenly he runs eagerly and anxiously up the great steps of the Vanstone mansion, for into his mind has flown, "She is near me. *Dios mio!* I am keeping my eyes from the sight they have hungered for."

As he thinks, he rings the bell at the wide, open portals.

This is almost immediately answered by a manservant, who says very respectfully: "Don Balasco, I believe."

"Yes; present my cards to the ladies and Mr. Vanstone."

"Certainly, sir. Your coming was expected. With your permission I will send down to your boat for your luggage."

"*Gracias.* My valet will attend to that. Only present my cards as quickly as possible." There is impatience in the Spaniard's voice.

A moment later Estrabon is in the parlor where, among flowering shrubs, and breathing through the open windows the soft perfumes from the blossoming gardens outside, he sits with a heart that beats more rapidly than it is wont, awaiting a coming sensation; and gets it, as Indra Vanstone glides into the room.

For if the girl had robbed herself for this man's undoing, she could not have done her work more craftily. All trace of watching and waiting by the sick-bed of her waif from the Gulf Stream has deserted her countenance, and left upon her fair

brow and delicate cheeks only the radiance of dazzling youth, dainty loveliness, and beauty ethereal.

The toilet this young lady has unwittingly achieved this afternoon is simplicity itself; but its effects are very potent upon the gentleman rising to receive her. To him she seems like a daze of radiance, vivacity, charm, and coquetry, rising from a cloud of green tulle, dashed here and there with fluffy white to give it sea-foam effects; and romance coming upon him, he murmurs to himself: "Venus Aphrodite!"

But if he thinks her the goddess of beauty, this young lady is also the goddess of hospitality. Her liquid voice says affably: "Welcome to Cocoanut Grove!" Her hand, after the manner of Americans, is extended to him.

This the Don gallantly kisses, *à l'Espagnol*, and a slight color of embarrassment tinges the girl's delicate cheeks, as she murmurs, "Your note reached us yesterday, Señor Balasco. Thank you very much for an immediate answer to my appeal about the wounded officer upstairs."

"Young Varona is better, I hope?" murmurs the Don. "He has not told you how he came to be wounded in an open boat in the Gulf stream?"

"That question shows you do not know Dr. Granite!" answers the young lady, cheerily. "Dr. Granite is the tyrant of the sickroom. Do you suppose he'd let us question a convalescent? But Dr. Granite says Señor Ramon is now much better. To-morrow, at the latest, you will be able to see him."

"Ah! then I am happy," replies Estrabon, gal-

lantly. "I shall have to remain here another day."

"Oh, I hope much longer," suggests the young lady, hospitably. "Papa says you must remain for the dance we give."

"Aha, a fandango!"

"Yes. We expect some friends from Palm Beach in a day or two. We shall ask every one as far away as Key Largo, but that won't be very many," says the girl. "Besides, Lieutenant Varona will then be convalescent, and you can consult with him about your beloved island."

"Ah, yes!" returns Estrabon. "A patriot is always thinking of *Cuba Libre*. You, I hope, are a friend of the cause."

"As much as an American can be," says Indra heartily.

"Then that is enough!" cries the Don, enthusiastically. Though he continues in his mind: "I will change her views on this subject. *Mi querida* shall become a Spaniard when she becomes ——" and gasps almost at his audacious quickness of determination and desire. For the exquisite tones of the young lady's voice, her gracious hospitality, vivacious gestures, and changing piquancy of expression, have put into Balasco's fiery, tropical mind, burning love and passionate desire; to both of which Miss Indra will add—unwittingly, perchance carelessly, but still all too effectively—with the many playful arts of young ladies who have been taught, after the American fashion, that man should bow down to them and masculinity is theirs to command, to amuse themselves with and then perhaps put away.

Had it not been for her good heart, Miss Vanstone would have been a flirt; as it is, dominated by high spirits, health, and youth, on a lonely island, with a picturesque cavalier standing by her side, she is very apt to make the best use of him that her education has taught her, and that is to make him her devotee—a dangerous thing, with a man of Spanish temperament and sensitive Castilian pride.

But coming events do not cast their shadows before, and the young lady enters into easy conversation with the gentleman standing before her, saying, "Papa will be here in a few minutes. I presume he is in his pineapple field, as usual. Gertie, my little sister—— You have seen her, I believe."

"Ah, yes," answers Estrabon, with a smile. "I had the pleasure of meeting Señorita Gertrude and your young brother at Key West, where, God be thanked, I was of a little service to them with their baggage. She is a vivacious child."

"She will impress that on you very shortly," laughs Indra, easily. "But we do not dine till seven. I have still time to show you our grounds. The place has changed greatly since papa bought it."

"Changed? *Caspita!* You have made of a coconut grove, a mangrove swamp and a pineapple field, a very heaven of the gods."

"I don't know to whom you refer by 'the gods,' unless it is Rex, who is at present fishing, I believe."

"Ah, but the *goddess* of this island!" suggests Estrabon, feasting his eyes on the beauty as she

trips ahead of him along the bright vistas of the garden.

"Have you not yet learnt that all women are mortals?" says the girl archly, playing havoc with the Don's soul by her vivacious movements, graceful poses, and that indescribable yet potential witchery we call charm of manner.

A moment after they sit down under the coconut trees, and get to chatting and laughing together like old friends, Balasco telling of equatorial scenes and Indra prattling of New York society. Finally, as illustration, the Don steps into the pineapple patch and shows his companion how they eat sugar-pines in Cuba, and the two together make a very pleasant *al fresco* afternoon of it. For Estrabon's manners are polished and pleasing, his mind vivacious and well informed, and the young lady has not had an eligible gentleman at her side for two or three weeks.

The time passes rapidly, the shadows are beginning to deepen, the land-breeze is coming up, when Miss Indra exclaims suddenly, "Oh, goodness! Is not that four bells from the *Flying Fish*? It must be six o'clock! Time to give my patient his medicine. I had forgotten the Cuban officer."

"And I had forgotten much more than that," laughs her cavalier, in happy voice. Then he says, a little tone of entreaty in his accent, "You must go?"

"Certainly," replies Indra. "I am a nurse."

"Ah, yes. And of course you are devoted to the—the sickroom?"

"Extremely."

This puts a pang into the Don's heart as he fol-

lows his Circe. But even as they reach the door of the house, this passes from him, for Miss Gertie runs down the big oaken stairway from the hall above, and cries savagely, "You're a fine nurse! You have forgotten our patient!" Then she adds sarcastically, "You needn't trouble yourself, Indra, I have given Ramon his medicine at the proper time. If he depended on you now, the sick man would die."

"Stop talking and come here!" laughs her sister. "Don't you remember, Don Balasco?"

"Ah, now I see what made you forget Ramon," remarks the Red Cross maiden. Then courtesying to the Spaniard, she babbles on, "But I am happy to tell you, Don Estrabon, that your friend will soon be well and strong, and very handsome, now he is getting fatter."

"Ah! Under such nurses, who could fail to live—live for his nurses!" murmurs the gentleman, the child's careless words putting joy into his soul.

But here Gertie astonishes both the Spaniard and her sister, for she says, anxiously, "Do you think, Don Balasco, that a man is very apt to fall in love with the young lady who takes very good care of him? Dr. Granite says they never do. At the New York hospital they have the handsomest corps of young women nurses, and he tells me no man ever cares a rap for them after he gets well and walks off. He says they associate them with suffering and physic and—— But Granite is an old poke," chirrup the young lady, "and between you and me I don't believe him."

"Bah!" says Estrabon, "No butcher of humanity is fit to dissect love."

"Well, you can discuss the question with the butcher of humanity at dinner—he sits next to you!" laughs Miss Vanstone, as they go into the house.

Upstairs, Estrabon finds his rooms airy and quarters magnificent. His valet and baggage have come up from the boat, and he enters the parlor, thirty minutes after, as perfect as to dress and appointment as any New York clubman.

Here he is greeted by his host, who says, "I would have given you my hand before, but nobody knew where to find me. You see, I was engaged fighting a battle with the ants for my pineapples."

"Ah, yes," replies Balasco, "we all have to fight for the sweet things of this world."

"*À propos* of that, let me thank you for the five hundred magnificent cigars you have just sent me."

"Yes, I took the liberty, as Señor Mastic told me how much you admired them, of presenting them."

"But I can't allow that," says Vanstone, warmly.

"I can let you have them no other way. Though I am in the cigar business, and would be happy to sell you any other brand," replies Don Estrabon. "But these I can only give to you, as they are a present to me—a gift from the Captain—" He checks himself, and does not make it "Captain-General of Cuba," but continues, "I cannot tell you his name. Sometimes captains are smugglers."

"So that's how the revenue man got hold of his!" laughs Vanstone.

As the two gentlemen have been talking, the others of the party have dropped in, and Estrabon finds himself introduced to the great physician,

who, though a savage in the sick-room and the terror of negligent hospital nurses and budding young surgeons, is much more complaisant in general society.

Young Mr. Rex also lounges in from some fishing or hunting expedition, and greets the Don as an old friend, in memory of his politeness to him in Key West. For Balasco has that peculiar tact of treating very young people as if they were very old people; a thing that generally tells quite strongly with adolescence in both sexes. In proof of this with Gertie and Rex very shortly become his companions, even playmates; for, like a great many others of the Latin race, this gentleman has a good deal of child nature in him—its exuberant joys—its almost unreasoning passions.

A moment later and Granite chuckles, "Behold my two Red Cross girls," and Indra and Gertrude enter, though not in hospital uniform. Miss Vanstone still wears the dress in which he has met her—upon the principle probably that it is best to let success alone. Gertie, however, has changed her apron and cap of the sick-room for a light evening gown. In it she looks like a young misses' fashion plate, its bodice giving charming glimpses of her white arms and delicate shoulders, and its short skirt showing her graceful feet and ankles in pretty slippers and exquisite hosiery.

Dinner is announced, and they all go in to a merry meal, the conversation growing general over oysters and soup; Dr. Granite giving them a somewhat gruesome account of a tremendous operation he has lately performed in New York. This he winds up by: "I cut the patient to

pieces in twenty minutes and sewed him up in thirty."

"And buried him in ten more," adds Rex, with the festive humor of youth.

"I never tell of my unsuccessful operations, young man," remarks the doctor, sagely. "I am a successful surgeon."

But Rex, having produced a smile, is now anxious to pose as a wit, and with the easy confidence of adolescence commences to distribute his *bons mots* about the table, producing general dismay.

"Gertie," he says, severely, to that young lady's prattle, "children should be seen and not heard."

"Please remember that yourself!" answers the girl, savagely. "Dr. Granite will tell you I'm a woman in the sick-room."

"Yes; you are doing very well," replies the physician, "now your sister has resigned."

"Ah, yes," interjects Rex, "since the arrival of *another* patient. That's Indra's style. One up, t'other down, in the language of the P. R. At fifteen it was Sammy Ransom, the fat boy; at sixteen Sammy had taken a back seat, and Julian Sturges, the Fauntleroy of Dodsworth's dancing school, reigned in his stead; at seventeen Fauntleroy had been dethroned, for our Billy was Great Mogul, and now Billy, the bad boy, is in the soup. Who comes next? Don't all speak at once!" and he grins jovially at Don Estrabon.

To this oration Miss Vanstone apparently gives no attention; though her cheeks are very prettily red as she seems interested in her *Pompano à la Creole*.

But Balasco opens his ears very widely upon hearing "Our Billy's" name, which the detective had sung in his ears only the day before, and as he listens makes a curious mistake. The Don's knowledge of English is, when not excited, very good, but he is not acquainted with the easy phraseology of juvenile New York, and it gives him a great joy and happiness to hear "Our Billy" rated as a boy among boys. So he puts Mr. William Arthur Severance out of his mind without further care, as a seventeen-year-old who is unworthy his attention or his jealousy.

He might, perhaps, get some more pertinent information in regard to the gentleman Rex is discussing did not the boy's oration come to an inglorious end. Mr. Vanstone looks up from the head of the table and says, "Rex, what did you say to Gertie a minute ago?"

"I know, papa," cries Gertie, merrily. "He said, 'Children should be seen and not heard.'"

"Well, I say the same thing!" remarks the head of the house, and emphasizes his words with a scowl that makes his son think the wax tapers have gone out on the dinner table. So Vanstone Junior devotes himself to the delights of gastronomy, and the rest of the party, relieved from youthful badinage, run along gayly toward dessert—Don Balasco devoting most of his time and conversation to Miss Indra, who sits beside him, every arch glance from her blue eyes, every pretty gesture of her fair hands, and every tripping sentence from her coral lips completing a conquest her counterfeit presentment had begun. But he doesn't dare to tell her of the photograph just

yet. That will come later, he thinks. When—and his dark eyes grow luminous with a romance that now dominates his Spanish soul.

After the coffee, the Don's wondrous cigars are produced, and even Granite smiles benignly as he blows the blue wreaths away, and says, "This is the only poison I prescribe for myself."

"Prescribe it for your patient upstairs," interjects Gertie, eagerly, and horrifies the physician by asserting, "Ramon has been begging for cigarettes ever since he recovered his senses."

"Good heavens! You did not give him any?" mutters Granite, aghast.

"No; but I promised him some as soon——"

"As soon as I go away to-morrow," replies the medical man, sharply.

"You think Señor Varona well enough for you to leave?" This is in Indra's voice.

"Yes; in a week that young fellow, who recuperates with all the vitality an open-air life gives a healthy man of twenty-five, will be as strong as a bull again—if you don't kill him with over-eating, cigarettes, and kindness."

"You are going so soon?" asks his host from the head of the table.

"I have to. From my telegrams I think half New York will die if I don't get there," laughs the physician. Then he says, inquiringly: "Do you think you can let me have the *Flying Fish*?"

"With pleasure," answers Vanstone, and Indra suggests: "Why not let it carry you to Miami? From there you can take a parlor car direct for New York."

"It will not inconvenience you?"

"Not at all. The yacht can then bring our party of visitors from Palm Beach."

"That'll suit me admirably," assents the physician. "I leave to-morrow afternoon. I'll have my Cuban hero down-stairs by that time."

"Yes, and I'll have Señor Ramon ready for picnics in a week!" cries Gertie, her eyes lighting up. "You can't tell how bright he gets when I come in the room!"

"Who would not, with such a nurse?" mutters the Doctor; a remark that makes the girl supremely happy.

A minute after the young ladies walk out on the veranda, and with them comes the Don.

"You need not throw away your cigar," observes Indra. "You don't know how much I like the perfume of the weed; besides, I shall have to leave you for a little while. My patient is upstairs."

Then comes a little incident that makes flame up in Estrabon's fervid nature excited hope.

Miss Gertie cries savagely: "Why do you always call him *your* patient, Indra? I should think you'd be ashamed of yourself—you're *so* greedy!"

Then the girl goes on, a curious kind of pathos in her voice: "Of course, I know, Indra, you happened to find him in a boat in the Gulf Stream; but I have nursed Ramon even more than you have, and now he's going to get well and be handsome I—I don't think it's nice of you to call him *your* patient. One would think you owned him!"

"Very well, I take you at your word, Gertie," laughs Indra, "and give him to you. Lieutenant

Varona is *your* patient ! Don't let me see you out of the sick-room. Run upstairs, child!" But this ending of her sentence is an unfortunate one.

"*Child!*" cries Miss Gertrude, coming up to her sister, with the light of battle blazing in her eyes. "How dare you call me CHILD? Of course, I know it is to make yourself important in *his* eyes!" This with a suggestive glance at Balasco. "But it's not quite fair, Indra, at your age. If you were twenty-five, or thirty, I could endure it; but it is contemptible for nineteen to reproach sixteen with being *young*." Then this tremendous peroration ceases—tears come into the girl's blue eyes—she mutters, "You—you are very unkind," and darts round the corner of the veranda.

But her sister is after her and, catching the fly-away, soothes, kisses, and comforts her, and perchance guessing what Miss Gertie's complaint is, goes about her work quite craftily, telling the child that Dr. Granite has told her that Señor Varona takes his medicine better from Señorita Gertrude's hands than from any others.

"That's because you don't care for him—but I tell you Lieutenant Ramon is going to be very handsome," snivels the younger.

"Don't I know that as well as you?" laughs Indra. "Run upstairs to your Cuban hero." Then perchance to clinch her praise, she adds lightly, "Perhaps *yesterday* I would not have been so generous!"

The Don as he smokes has not heard much of this confab round the corner; but as Indra returns to him his eyes blaze like two black opals—the girl's cheeks grow red—she wonders: "Did he

catch my careless words? I could bite my tongue for having uttered them."

But Estrabon's manner soon places her at her ease, and the two sit and chat by themselves, for Vanstone and Granite are still in the dining-room, Rex has wandered off, and Gertie is acting hospital nurse upstairs. Then Mother Eve comes up in the young lady who has been accustomed to admiration, and on this lonely isle has had but little of it, and Indra Vanstone makes herself so winning, so gracious, so enchanting that every soft word she utters and every piquant gesture or arch look she gives him makes Estrabon Balasco's heart beat stronger.

So the tropic evening goes on—the gentleman thinking he's in heaven, the young lady knowing she's on earth. And as earthly things are satiating—after singing Don Estrabon some Spanish love songs, accompanying herself on a guitar and making herself so agreeable, coquettish, and alluring that in a few moments more the Hidalgo will lose his head and say words that will cut his romance very short—Miss Indra Vanstone bids her cavalier good-night, trips up to her room and says to herself, "Don César de Bazan is a very pleasant fellow and I've had a delightful evening."

Careless words for the calling up of a passion this young lady will find very hard to down—for she has put into the heart of her Spanish admirer a first-class medieval emotion, one of the kind that makes its owner do very curious things, when thwarted, slighted, or not returned.

Even as the girl nestles amid her snowy

sheets, this gentleman is seated below on the deserted veranda, and is building for himself a rosy castle in his native country, that did she but see it, would make Indra Vanstone shriek. He is likewise murmuring to himself these words that would make the girl's blood run cold, did she but hear them: "Indra, *mi querida*, thy beauties, thy love shall all be for me and for no other man on earth! Of this I, Estrabon Balasco, make solemn oath unto myself."

CHAPTER VII.

"I DEMAND LONG DRESSES!"

THE next morning Miss Indra makes her appearance at the breakfast table looking like a rosebud with dew on it, and gets to playing with fire again—very innocently, perhaps unwittingly, and certainly never dreaming of the way in which she is going to burn her pretty fingers with the Spanish furnace in Don Balasco's fervid heart.

This gentleman has apparently been awaiting her coming, as the rest have all finished their matutinal meal and wandered off, but the Don has lingered, refusing Mr. Vanstone's invitation to pineapple inspection and Rex's suggestion of early billiards.

So the others have gone to their business or their pleasure, leaving the Spaniard to his delight, which shortly comes to him in the form of Miss Indra Vanstone.

"You waited for me—that's very nice," remarks the young lady cordially, as she seats her-

self and pours out her coffee. "If you can contrive to linger over your fruit till I catch up to you, Goliah and I will give you half an hour's sail, and I'll tell you of my new invention."

"Your new invention?"

"Yes, my picnic cruise. It's a little surprise I have for everybody, but I need your aid, so I'll let you into my secret."

"Your confidence is my delight."

"Oh, it will be a charming novelty. I thought of it last evening after I had left you. I said it shall be *al fresco*, Bohemian, romantic," says Miss Indra enthusiastically. "I shall want your advice as to how many the *Flying Fish* will accommodate; besides, you can get the Cuban musicians for me." Then she gives the Spaniard a glance of piquant pathos and murmurs: "You'll help me, won't you, *mi caballero*?"

"With my life!" answers the Don, and his eyes become radiant; for he is not very well accustomed to the easy ways of American young ladies, and many things Miss Vanstone does in a careless freedom that is habitual to her class this Hidalgo judges by a foreign code and hugs fondly to his soul as evidences of the girl's perpetual favor, even to love and passion.

"Then if you've finished we'll run along. On the water I'll give you the details of my picnic cruise," remarks his charmer in easy unconventionality. "You can carry my sunshade over me; the dew is on the grass and I need my hands for my skirts."

With this chatter, she trips beside Estrabon through the gardens down to the landing stage,

where her boat and Goliah are in waiting, every step adding fuel to the Spaniard's flame. Then they pass a happy half-hour on the water, the young lady steering her skiff round the *Flying Fish*, the crew of which are even now engaged in preparations for their departure with Dr. Granite this afternoon for Miami, the southern terminus of the East Coast Florida Railway.

"She flies over the water like a witch," remarks Indra, gazing at the steam yacht's graceful hull. "When she returns with the house party, then, after the fandango, I give my picnic cruise." With this the girl makes confidant of the Don in her new schemes of entertainment, causing him great happiness as she closes her discourse by saying, "For a day or two this must be *our* little secret."

"And shall we not have another little secret some day?" returns Estrabon, who has for the moment lost his head under the allurements of beauty floating over blue waters.

"Oh, half a dozen of them, I hope, some day," says Indra, unconcernedly, as she steps lightly out of the boat, which is again at the landing stage.

"*Dios mio!*" mutters the Don, astounded. "What did she mean by that?" And he assists the young lady with ceremonious gallantry up the stairs that lead to the wharf, noting, while doing so, that Miss Vanstone has the most beautiful feet and exquisite ankles in the world.

Rex, seated on the veranda, watches their coming, and this youthful philosopher communes with himself as follows, "By Jove! if there's a man within sight he always goes to playing round Indra." Then he adds with a sigh, "Poor Billy, I

wonder where he's doing the heavy swell act now. Sometimes I think she regrets giving him his passport."

But Estrabon has no thought of Billy or any one else, he is so vivaciously happy as he comes up the stairs, Miss Vanstone talking merrily to him.

Here they are met by Mr. Vanstone, that gentleman saying cheerily: "I've been looking out for your guests, Indra; seeing the *Flying Fish* was properly provisioned and well *corked* for her run to Miami and return."

"You won't forget to tell Captain Thomas he must wait there till Mrs. Ormiston, Flora Woodbridge and Ethel Rivers come down to board her with Jack Blakely and young Vortex," remarks Indra, earnestly.

"Of course not," laughs her father. "I would not miss little Cortright Vortex for a tip in Wall Street."

"You know Vortex is always having adventures," he adds, addressing Don Balasco. "At Palm Beach two weeks ago, I noticed in the papers that have come down to us that Mr. Vortex got lost in the Everglades and was out all night, surrounded by alligators."

"Yes, the report said his hair would have turned white, if it had not been straw-colored to begin with," interjects Indra.

"I suppose Vortex will be food for sharks down here," giggles Miss Gertie, who has just joined the party apparently in high spirits, for she now informs them that her patient will be down on the veranda this afternoon, and ready for bull-fights next week.

"I have spoken to Señor Ramon about you, Don Balasco, and he will be delighted to talk to you. He is anxious for news of the war, but Dr. Granite thinks that had better be postponed till to-morrow;" she continues, "then you two patriots can get together."

Filled with her news, Miss Red-Cross is now a picture of mirth, glee, happiness and high spirits; so much so that Rex, who is a youthful cynic, remarks: "You're mighty pert, Gertie, about having euchred your sister out of her patient and practically told old Granite that now he has got your wounded hero on his feet you can do the rest. But I reckon pride will have a fall."

It does!

This very afternoon the prophecy of the juvenile sage comes true—with hideous details.

It is just after lunch. Dr. Granite and the youthful nurse are making preparations to bring Miss Gertie's patient and hero downstairs upon the veranda, where the sea breeze will be cool, refreshing, and bracing. Vanstone *père* is in the library attending to some business correspondence. Rex, Indra, and her attendant Spaniard are seated on the portico awaiting the coming invalid, a slight nervous curiosity on the Don's face. He wonders if this wounded Cuban may not have some suspicion of his devotion to the patriot cause. Maceo might know more than Key West. Miss Vanstone is not yet a convert to Spanish ideas—a revelation now would be too soon.

There is a patter of light feet in high-heeled shoes upon the steps of the oaken stairway and through the great hallway; Gertrude comes quietly upon

the veranda and without a word sinks kneeling by her sister's side and puts her head into Indra's lap, so quietly that the three, who are conversing carelessly, scarcely notice her, as this is one of the cunning little ways Miss Gertie has with her sister, of whom she is very fond.

Suddenly, to their astonished ears, comes out from the girl's head, that is buried in Indra's lap, one awful heart-breaking, soul-stirring sob.

"*Santos!* What has happened?" ejaculates Estrabon.

Sob!

"Gertie!" cries Rex.

Sob! SOB! SOB!

"Is it about Varona?" whispers Indra, growing pale.

CONVULSIONS!!!

"He has had a relapse!" cries Miss Vanstone, in agitated voice.

"No; it is worse—WORSE!"

"Worse!" Indra starts up. "What is the matter? Tell me quick! Is not Dr. Granite upstairs with him? Rex, run and call the doctor! Perhaps he's in the library with papa."

"No; Dr. Granite is with him. That's what made it so—so hard to bear!" moans the girl.

"So hard to bear! Is he dead?" gasps Rex, excitedly.

"No-o-o-o!" This is a wail of anguish. "He—he said," gasps Gertrude, sobs choking her, "he said to Dr. Granite—I heard him—'She is a pretty little—*little* girl!' He—he has broken my heart!"

At this astounding revelation Balasco chokes

down a gasp of merriment, but Rex does not restrain his, and shrieks, "Great Scott! I thought Ramon had burst a blood-vessel." Then he jeers in youthful carelessness, "Shake her up; give her paregoric! The great nurse of the sickroom, the potentate of lotions and bandages, is a pretty *little* girl!" and goes off into spasms of laughter.

"I don't see how we can help your malady, Gertie," remarks Miss Vanstone, relief upon her face, "unless you wish to put those curls into a solitary pigtail, and deface those pretty features, and become an *ugly* little girl."

"Don't dare make fun of me!" screams Gertrude. Then the tears leave her face, and passion enters it. She says, her eyes blazing, "Stop laughing! Indra, since mother died you have pretended to be the head of the family. I demand long dresses!"

"Why, your feet and ankles, Gertie, are dead up to the mark," laughs Rex, assuming an elder brother air. "I heard young Jones say at dancing school that your——"

But Gertie cut short Jones's compliment by screaming, "I'll kill young Jones!"

"Why, your skirts are hardly shorter than a lawn-tennis costume, and a good deal more elongated than a bike suit, *à la mode*," suggests Dr. Granite, who has followed his weeping nurse down-stairs, attempting to throw oil on troubled waters.

"That's it!" cries Gertrude. "You've *noticed* the length of my skirts, Dr. Granite! I have arrived at an age when it is *noticeable*."

Then with flaming cheeks and haughty air she

turns upon her sister again, and says: "Indra, in the name of *decency*, I demand long dresses!"

During this outbreak Miss Vanstone has seemed to have some problem in her mind. She immediately answers her younger sister.

"That being the case, Gertie," she says, "you shall have as long skirts as you want. Only I don't see how you can get them immediately."

"Oh Heaven! He see me in these!" moans Gertrude, giving a despairing glance at her petite slippers and openwork stockings. "I shall be branded schoolgirl—child—infant—in his eyes forever."

Just here Indra's generous heart comes into play. She says brightly, "Don't you think a few of my new ones—I have had a lot sent me from New York—would suit you for the present, Gertie?"

"Suit me?" screams Miss Adolescence. "Suit me?—to a dot! Indra, God bless you; you have saved me from despair. Give me that white organdie, with cream lace and pink ribbons, so I can see him and crush him right off when he comes down." Then she laughs: "Ramon will think I only tucked up my skirts so as not to have them rustle in the sick-room. I want to pour coals of fire on my patient's ungrateful head."

"Very well," returns Indra. "Come with me and call Annie, the seamstress, and we will see what we can do toward putting you into—into society."

"Quick—my heaven—he'll be down soon!" gasps Gertie, and flies into retirement, followed by her sister.

A few moments after, assisted by Granite, Señor Ramon Varona steps slowly upon the veranda, and would sink immediately onto a settee, did not Castilian politeness make him pause and bow to the two gentlemen, who rise to receive him.

"Ah, *mi amigo!*" cries Estrabon, seizing the convalescent's hand, "You'll soon be ready to fight the Spaniards."

"Don't stop for formalities!" commands Granite. "Sit down, Varona, take things easy. All you have to do now is to keep quiet, and you'll soon be yourself again. This is young Mr. Rex Vanstone, the brother of the two young ladies."

"Mr. Vanstone," says the young Cuban, in perfect English, "I once went to the same school as you did, in New York. You remember Charlier's Academy, on Fifty-ninth street? You were almost a child then—I was much older."

"By Jove!" remarks Rex, "I remember you now also. We little boys used to call you '*Cuba Libre.*' You were quite fat then."

"Ah, yes!" The invalid laughs slightly, then murmurs, "But those were happier days; I was quite fat then," and looks at his emaciated hand.

"Of course you are a little thin now," laughs the boy, "but we have a darky cook who will fatten anybody. Dr. Granite, here, has not given her a chance. That's what's the matter with you."

"Well, I leave this evening," remarks the medical man, "and to-morrow I suppose your cook will get her deadly work in on my patient."

"Not while Señorita Gertrude acts as head nurse," suggests Don Estrabon, laughingly.

"Ah, yes. Your two sisters, where are they? I had supposed they would welcome me to the veranda," remarks the young man, throwing his eyes about rather eagerly.

To this the brother answers, "They're making a toilette for the occasion, especially Gertie."

"You had better not take any more exertion, Señor Varona," interjects Dr. Granite; "at least not for the present. Take things calmly—and for God's sake don't do *that*!" he adds, in medical horror.

Rex has produced a package of cigarettes for his own use, and noting longing on the Cuban's face, has hospitably handed him one, which Ramon's educated fingers are rapidly preparing for his lips.

"*Diantre!* I haven't smoked for a month," murmurs the invalid. "Permit me but one—in the name of charity, permit me one, *medico*. It is a proof that I am at last out of thy hands," pleads Ramon softly, yet with southern grace.

"But not out of *my* hands!" With these words, spoken with laughing but determined voice, Miss Gertie swoops upon her patient, and with one deft grab confiscates his cigarette.

"*Sanctissima!*" murmurs the invalid, then seems astonished at his nurse's appearance. A sudden vivacity seems to come to the wounded man. He rises, and holds out entreating hand, murmuring, "Don't you see I'm well enough to smoke?"

"By Jove!" whispers Rex to the Don, with whom now he is on terms of easy friendship, "Is the cigarette or Gertie, Varona's tonic?"

And Gertie would be a tonic to most men. For

she is now a fascinating, yet resolute picture of adolescent womanhood, and commanding ministering angel.

"By Jove!" thinks Rex, as he gazes, "She's stolen Indra's best gown to mash the Cuban with."

And this seems to be the truth, for Gertrude is now arrayed in a toilet that has been created by some master of modistes who gives woman his aid for the allurements and enthrallment of man. Like most masterpieces, it is simple in appearance, but tremendous in effect. Though light, fluffy and blow-away, it outlines every curve of beauty in the girl's lithe figure, yet lends substance to her graceful though immature lines of youth. Apparently high-necked, it permits exquisite glimpses of fair arms and ivory neck. But what endears it most to Gertie is that it has a nice long skirt, and makes her fondly think her height, which is not abnormal, commanding; yea, even colossal.

At all events, in it Miss Gertie has a potent effect upon the Cuban. His dark eyes become lustrous—yet very winning. His manner, which was languid, even for an invalid, suddenly grows animated to vivacity. He murmurs, "I—I had thought you——" then suddenly appears confused.

"A pretty *little* girl. I heard you," laughs Gertrude.

Then she adds contemplatively, "You did not displease me. I don't mind assuming a youth that has now gone from me. A few years ago I should have resented the suspicion of childhood, but as we grow older we grow wiser, don't we, Señor Lieutenant?" This is said with such an affecta-

tion of mature philosophy, yea, even matronly regret for girlish days, that Ramon, looking at her, gasps, in a dazed and astonished manner, "Señora, you are married. I—I had supposed——" and sinks down on his settee once more, apparently confounded, disconcerted, and, perchance, unhappy.

"By Jove!" giggles Rex into Estrabon's ear, "If Varona doesn't think Gertie has got a husband. O, short-skirts, this is too rich!" And unable to contain himself, the boy staggers round the corner of the veranda, and would go into convulsions quietly by himself.

But the humor of the situation chancing to strike the Hidalgo with equal force, he steps after Rex, and the two play the boy together, and hold each other up as the tears roll down their cheeks in an ecstasy of merriment.

This leaves Gertie in convenient *tête-à-tête* with the Cuban; Granite having gone up stairs to pack his gripsack, as the *Flying Fish* now has steam up and is coming to the wharf to take him for his trip to Miami.

She is the girl to take advantage of it. She says sympathetically, "You are in despair? For what?"

"*Caspita!* Haven't I cause to be?" mutters the Cuban.

"You—you don't think I'm married?" screams Gertie. Then the humor of the thing striking the girl, she goes into convulsions herself. But a moment after a tenderer emotion seems to dominate her, and she murmurs, "You would feel badly if I had a husband?"

"Ah! You have not!" cries the young man, passion driving out languor. "You have not! *Señorita*, I see it by your eyes, you have not."

But Gertrude, who, if she was a child this morning, has grown too much of a woman this afternoon to permit hasty wooing, suddenly says: "Ah! You're strong once more. I am glad to see that. Strong enough to smoke. Here, take your cigarette, enjoy it, while I bring my sister to you," then runs away, the happiest little girl in America.

On all this Don Balasco has gazed with laughter but indifference. He thinks: "What has *Señorita* Gertie's childish passion to do with me and my great love?" Then he inspects the Cuban, who has dropped into a chair again, and notes a curious change. In the year since he has seen him, this young man has become a soldier, and a handsome one. He has dark eyes that would be flashing did not languor now dominate them, a long, graceful mustache, firm, thin lips, white and perfect teeth, and a fine forehead that is now slightly scarred by a machete wound. His manner has military determination, and his skin, which has that clear tint peculiar to pure Castilian blood, is still partly bronzed by the continuous exposure of rapid marching under the wind and sun, despite the confinement of the sickroom.

As the Don thinks this, old Mr. Vanstone comes upon the veranda, and shaking the invalid's hand, says: "You've taken a load off my mind by pulling through, my boy."

"Ah, how can I ever thank you!" returns Varona. "Even these clothes——" he looks at some

very handsome garments that adorn him, then murmurs, "Every Cuban is now poor."

"Don't let that trouble you, Señor Ramon," remarks Estrabon; "you can draw on me and then we'll see what the Junta will do for you."

Now this is a very fortunate speech for the Don. Miss Indra coming out on the balcony chances to hear it, and the look she casts upon Balasco puts him into the seventh heaven. But Varona cries, "Not a *peso* from our patriot committee! Their money is all for arms to fight the accursed Spaniard!"

Here this style of conversation is put a stop to by Dr. Granite, who is coming out to board the *Flying Fish*. "Not another word on the fighting subject, my young bantam!" he cries. "Not till you've more blood in your body. Those gentlemen over there," he waves his hand to the south, "practiced a very considerable and nearly successful phlebotomy on you. Now mark me," he adds solemnly, addressing Balasco and Ramon, "don't either of you patriots talk shop for a day or two. Good-bye. Don't rise, Varona." Then he chuckles, "I think, though, I ought to have kisses from both nurses, if the young men don't mind."

With this the potentate of the sick-room goes down the steps attended by Indra and Gertie, and on the gang plank that leads to the *Flying Fish* gets two hearty salutes from his Red Cross girls.

Gazing at this from the veranda, as Indra's fair cheek is brushed by the venerable physician's grizzled mustache, Estrabon clenches his hands, then mutters: "Pish! the old dolt is over sixty—

but after she is——” and goes to thinking more happy thoughts as the *Flying Fish* dashes away toward Miami and railroads, mid the waving of handkerchiefs by the young ladies, and view-halloos from Rex.

These amatory ideas Balasco condenses this evening as he smokes one of his famed *Imperiales*.

His Circe has just left him, and left him pleased with himself, for she has flattered him by an after-dinner *tête-à-tête*, that she has thought pleasant and interesting, but the Don has deemed rapturous and romantic, interrupted only by semi-occasional visits from Gertie, who, her invalid having gone to bed, now walks about the veranda disconsolate, and by transient appearances of Rex, who suggests billiards.

Each glance at the girl, who had taken easy, yet effective, pose in a hammock, has been but putting oil upon the flames, for now, somehow, he thinks she loves him, and construes an habitual coquetry into a Juliet's passion. Miss Vanstone had dropped her handkerchief—it was that he might pick it up—and then his hand had touched her taper fingers as he returned the bit of lace. Indra wore blue this evening; had he not told her it was his favorite color? Even when she said good-night, she said it with a sigh, and her little hand rested in his, as with Spanish gallantry he had kissed it. Yes, it had trembled under his mustache, he is sure of that. So, carried away by a romance that manufactures romance, Estrabon murmurs, “*Mi querida!* It will be a good match both for her and for me. I am rich; she is rich. We are young; we love. Indra shall be

happy in my adoration, my tenderness, my guidance. I will make this earth a heaven for her, my bride," and passion running riot, Señor Balasco builds up in his vivid imagination a palace of cards that will some day fall down and crush him as fatally as if each two-spot were a great marble column and each jack a massive girder of ponderous weight.

As for Miss Indra, she says: "We killed time very nicely to-day."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MASSACRE OF A HOSPITAL.

IT is a pleasant evening on the day after the departure of Dr. Granite; a day which has afforded Don Estrabon many fascinating little interviews with his hostess, all of which have added faggots to the fire that burns within him.

The two have been left alone together several times. Miss Gertie has been occupied with her patient, who now says he is a patient no longer, and proves it by striding about the garden attended by his devoted nurse; Mr. Vanstone has been engaged in fighting his perpetual ant pest, so after a game or two of billiards, which he has played with Rex to keep him quiet, the Don has had practically a clear field to himself. This he has occupied in discussing with Miss Indra various details of the *fête* she is going to give to her house party, and the picnic cruise which will follow. It has of course given her admirer no very great opportunities for passionate expression, but the young lady's manner

has been very cordial, and she has thanked him very prettily for the trouble to which he has gone in ordering the Cuban musicians from Key West, and acting as general directory in sending out invitations for her dance to the few families on the surrounding keys. She has also given him a posy for his buttonhole, and told him that she hopes he dances very well, adding laughingly: "Then you can teach me the bolero and the cachucha."

Now all these are very little things, but, emphasized and embellished by bright eyes, piquant gestures and soft voice, they are enough to make the Spaniard romantically happy.

Consequently, this evening, as he sits on the veranda listening to the light conversation of the elder Vanstone and his family, Don Estrabon considers himself one of the blest.

"Do you not think our isle looks lonely without the dear old *Flying Fish*?" suggests Indra, gazing toward the vacant moorings of the pleasure craft.

"*Our* isle!" repeats the Don to himself, his eyes lighting up.

"By this time Granite must be flying northward," remarks Mr. Vanstone. "And the yacht must be embarking her cargo of fashionables from Palm Beach. They run down from there to Miami by rail, I believe."

"Then we may look for them to-morrow morning, if Mr. Thomas, the captain, who is a cautious man among reefs, drives her," returns Indra, who is leaning against the balustrade, carelessly looking out over the water.

"She could do it in ten hours, easy," interjects Rex, "if Thomas had any go in him. The *Flying*

Fish is about the fastest thing in our family, except——” Here he nods his head and winks his eye toward Gertie, who is seated near Señor Varona, in a *tête-à-tête* which is much more that of young man and young woman than that of patient and nurse.

“What the devil do you mean, boy?” ejaculates Vanstone *père*, scowling at his offspring.

But before he can get answer, the young lady under discussion comes up and says sternly, “Papa, I’m told there are no more chops in the cold-room. You must send at once to Key West for chops.”

“And why are chops so necessary for your happiness?”

“Chops are necessary for *his* health. They have been ordered by Dr. Granite—chops three times a day. Do you suppose I’m going to let my patient die for want of chops?” cries Gertrude, savagely.

Here the invalid, strolling up, remarks, “I beg you, Señorita Gertrude, do not trouble yourself about chops. Anything from unripe bananas and cocoanuts, wild hog’s flesh or dried iguana will be princely fare to one who has marched and foraged with Maceo.”

“You fought with Maceo?” murmurs Gertie, her eyes becoming luminous. “You know you have not told us anything about what brought you so near to death,” falters the girl.

“That was on account of Dr. Granite’s orders,” answers the young man. Then he adds vivaciously: “Now I am entirely at your service for information.”

"Don't give it yet, my boy," says Vanstone, "if you don't feel up to it."

"Pooh! I am no more on the sick list," laughs the convalescent. "I have traveled for weeks with greater wounds on me than I have now. It was not my injuries, but starvation and thirst that brought me so near to death. Besides, in the last twenty-four hours I have eaten four square meals—excuse the Americanism—but I was educated in New York, and would still live there, were it not necessary that I should fight for my poor island."

"That is well spoken, Varona!" cries Estrabon heartily. "Were I not of greater use here, I would stand by your side."

"Besides," mutters young Varona, "I have a murdered brother——"

"One killed recently?" falters Indra, under her breath.

"No; an elder brother—one of the medical students of 1871. He was hardly a boy—not much over your age, young Señor Rex—when he patted my head (I could hardly toddle then) and went out to his studies, never to come back. You have heard the story, I presume."

The young man turns away and walks slowly to the corner of the balcony, leaving his hearers impressed. They have all read in American newspapers of that awful schoolboy tragedy of Havana.

A moment later the Cuban returns to them and says: "I don't know why I should burden you with my troubles or those of my island——"

"Which you may be sure are our troubles!" cries Gertie, intensely.

"Ah! You make me very happy," returns Varona with grateful eyes. "Still it is not extraordinary. You are but one hundred miles away from the misery of my land. It would be strange if the people of America, free and happy, should not sympathize with—should not aid—a people struggling for liberty and suffering from a military tyranny as cruel as that of Alva, three hundred years ago." Then he adds, apologetically: "I do not wish to take your time; but I suppose, Mr. Vanstone, you should know how I came here."

"Not if it will inconvenience you in any way," returns the American.

"Oh, tell us!" whispers Gertie, with underbreath eagerness.

"Then listen," says the Cuban, sadly, "to the story of the massacre of a hospital."

"*Diablo!* Did they do that?" cries Estrabon, attempting great malevolence of voice.

"Listen! You know, Balasco, I was born in Havana, of a good and fairly wealthy family. A sugar estate at one end of the island, and a tobacco plantation at the other, gave us our income. I was too young to understand or share my mother's despair, my father's agony, when he threw himself on his knees before the Captain-General and cried, 'A pound of gold for every pound of the body of my boy, whom you have sentenced to be shot!'

"A year afterward, I was still too much of a child to understand my mother's death in New York, where my father had taken her to try and make her forget the murder of her firstborn. Then I was too young, but I have learned now, of my

own knowledge, what my brother, my father, my mother, must have suffered.

"A few years ago, my father died—a lonely man, leaving me, a more lonely boy, in New York. I had friends among the Cuban colony—dear friends; but my family estates required my attention in Havana.

"From the moment I arrived there I was what you may call 'a suspect.' Though at that time, the island being tranquil, I was simply watched—not molested. Then came the uprising, a year ago. Maceo landed, Gomez landed, Marti landed. The flame of freedom burnt in the island once more. Anxious to join the patriot bands, I was held back, persuaded against it, by an old friend of my father's, José Castillo, who whispered, 'I have seen that tried before; it brought to them only death or exile.'

"For a time, I took Castillo's advice and lingered in Havana, where Campos still remained—Captain-General of Cuba, but also a human being to whom humanity could appeal. One day it was whispered to me, 'Weyler is coming!' Then I knew it was either to go back to America, there to remain placidly watching my country's struggle, and curse myself forever for being inactive, or to take to the mountains, the swamps, the canebrakes, and join some insurgent leader. I did so. Maceo at that time was marching into Pinar del Rio, and there I took service with him, but without arms.

"While there word came to me that Castillo, who had counseled non-resistance and inaction, had been arrested and deported to Cuenta for life.

Then I knew what all know now—that in Cuba the non-combatant, the unresisting, the *pacífico*, is never spared.

“Soon after, the *Three Friends* made her appearance on the coast. I assisted in making the landing, and, as a reward, obtained what a Cuban values most—arms with which to fight. With Maceo I marched through Pinar del Rio. Under him and Quintin Bandera I fought in half a hundred skirmishes, for what the Spanish General calls a battle is generally an affair of outposts, more often the murdering of a few helpless peasants in the fields, whom he says give us information. So on until—what day is this?” asks the Cuban suddenly. “I have lost all reckoning of time.”

“The 25th of April,” returns Vanstone.

“Ah! Then it was more than two weeks ago. An expedition arrived at Pinar del Rio, bearing arms, ammunition and dynamite. Under Quintin Bandera, I—then an aide-de-camp on Maceo’s staff—was sent to assist the landing and receive the goods, for we have generally definite information of both place and time when expeditions from America will reach us. It was at a little beach concealed by hills from patrolling gunboats, some few miles east of the bay on which the half-burnt town of Cabañas stands. Under Bandera some five hundred of us had marched down from Maceo’s camp in the Rubi mountains and made connection with the landing party, even to a day. Our time was exact, but the Spaniards had in some way notice of the landing and attacked us. We protected the goods and the ship got safely away, but Bandera

lost a few men killed and had some men wounded. Ah! that is the horror of the Cuban soldier—to *be wounded!*

“From a height we could see Spanish reinforcements dispatched from Cabañas. The goods over which we had charge were of too vital import to Maceo’s army for us to dare to risk an engagement with numbers that might overpower us. What to do with the wounded was Bandera’s agony. They could not be taken away. Were they left, it was to be slaughtered like sheep in the shambles. That is what the Spaniards do with our poor wounded boys down there, who by all the laws of humanity—of even war—should have the nurse’s tenderness, the surgeon’s skill. Instead of that, it is the machete and the bullet, as they lie helpless on the field of battle or in the hammocks of the hospital.

“What to do with the wounded? It was the lives of a few men, or the loss of Maceo’s supplies and munitions, that perhaps meant even the sacrifice of Cuban independence. There were not over twenty helpless ones, and they whispered, with fevered lips: ‘Go on, leave us! We die, but Cuba lives.’ We had only horses enough to carry the landed arms and ammunition. Each wounded man borne away meant the loss to Maceo of two-thousand rounds of ball cartridge, a case of rifles, or a hundred pounds of dynamite. Suddenly to me, who knew the coast well, as our family’s destroyed tobacco fields were in that neighborhood, came the memory of a hiding place. I cried to the general: ‘I know a place of concealment.’

“‘Can you reach it in twenty minutes?’ Ban-

dera asked hurriedly, for the Spanish columns were almost upon us.

“ ‘Yes; keep the Spaniards employed for that time and I’ll save our wounded,’ I answered.

“ ‘Then, Varona,’ said my general, ‘I place you in charge of ten men. With them make hospital in the retreat you speak of. But, remember, concealment is your best, I think, your only hope.’

“To act quickly is the habit of the partisan soldier. Bandera held his ground against the Spanish troops. Within half an hour, in a little cove that ran in from the sea, but was concealed from both land and water by growing palms, mangroves, and aloe bushes, I had the wounded safe from Spanish eyes. Bandera’s light line of skirmishers faded away toward the mountains. I was left alone with ten men, guarding twenty wounded ones, concealed in an enemy’s country—and that enemy the Spaniard.

“With us was a young American, Tom Karrick Lewis, an assistant surgeon, who graduated at Bellevue but a year ago. He had volunteered to remain with a slight stock of medicines and a few surgical instruments and do what he could for the bleeding men who lay about us on the ground. While he ministered to them, my men and I hastily erected sheds of palm leaves to protect them from the sun. A tiny brook, which came babbling down the rocks, gave us fresh water. Behind us was a little hill, covered with prickly cacti, matted thorn bushes, and tropical jungle; beyond that, a few yards of mangrove swamp, and then the mainland.

“The wounded, made as comfortable as our

means permitted—some on the ground, a few in hammocks—there was nothing for me to do but watch unceasingly—by day, by night. I was a young officer under an awful responsibility. Often in the next week I could have fled with my ten unwounded soldiers, but would have been compelled to leave twenty helpless ones. Spanish columns at times passed very near to us, and one fearful hour we had an awful struggle with a delirious wretch, whose screams would have betrayed us to our enemies had not the surgeon chloroformed him to save the rest. So by day I lurked there, my nights occupied by prowling through the country to get food to keep life in the wounded.

“At last, one unlucky hour, I wandered to an estate on which lived a Cuban lady who had been a friend of my mother’s. To her I told my tale. She said: ‘Some time you will be followed, and your wounded men discovered. Each day I will send my boy to your command with provisions enough to keep you alive for twenty-four hours. Return to defend your helpless ones.’

“‘I cannot let you take that risk,’ I dissented. ‘If you are found aiding us——’

“‘I am but a woman,’ the lady answered, ‘and the boy is only a child—young enough to be spared by the butchers around us for a year or two longer.’

“Each day after that, the boy, Tonio, brought food to us by a hidden path through the swamp. While with us the little fellow would often play with the young American surgeon, who was a great, big, jovial boy himself, with a heart as big as his own noble profession, and high spirits that cheered even the wounded and the despairing.

"Then one day, the boy did not come.

"That evening I spied him in a skiff, fishing in the quiet waters just outside of the cove. When darkness came, his boat glided into the glen a few steps from our hospital, which was but a few palm-thatched huts to shelter the wounded from wind and rain and sun. Into my hands Tonio gave the fish he had caught and some ears of corn that he had concealed in a locker in his boat, and said: 'I dare not come by the path. They suspect me.'

"'Leave your boat with me,' answered I, 'and we, after nightfall, will sail along the coast and fish and gather provisions for ourselves. Now mark me! Come to us no more as you value your own life and that of your dear mother!'

"'I understand,' answered the boy. 'My mother has taught me. When I am old enough, I raise the machete also!'

"That night I held consultation with the American surgeon. 'When will the wounded be ready to travel?' I asked.

"'Three or four could get out now,' was Lewis's reply. 'Ten more within two days. Two are already dead, and four, whose legs I have amputated, cannot be moved for weeks. Wait two days longer, my dear Ramon,' he added—we had become very good friends; mutual danger having brought us very close together—'then steal away, taking with you the convalescents. The four who cannot walk I will remain with. Even if they find me, those devils will not injure a surgeon under the Geneva cross.'

"But ever since the boy had told me he was suspected, an anxiety greater than before seemed

to be upon me. I went to work, making what preparations I could. I had the boat prepared, determined at the worst to put the wounded men in it and try to ship them to America. The Gulf Stream flowed beside us at the rate of nearly four miles an hour; with a proper breeze it would give the necessary northeasterly direction, and within a day or two my charges might make landing on either the Dry Tortugas or Key West.

"That night I told the surgeon that I would wait no longer. The coming morning I would take with me those of the wounded who were able to travel, and with them, through by-paths in the mountains, rejoin Maceo. The balance I would place in the skiff with three men to manage it, and they would set sail and try to cross the Gulf Stream to safety.

"'I believe you have hit the best plan,' whispered poor Lewis to me.

"But even while we were speaking, there came to us, over the silence of the night, the screams and shrieks of agony unendurable. These awful sounds seemed to me about two hundred yards away, inland of us.

"Our patrols were efficient—the men knew their own lives depended on their eyes and ears. Hurriedly I glided to our most advanced sentinel. He whispered: 'The screaming came from just beyond the swamp.'

"In that direction I crawled, following the trail leading through the mangroves. As I reached the mainland, through interlacing vines and creepers, and trunks of palm trees, I saw a camp-fire. Creeping near it, as I peered out from the thick

chaparral, with machete drawn and pistol ready, I heard a boy's moan, and saw the first horror of that night.

"A company of Spanish guerrillas were in a little clearing in the forest. Half of them were lying on the ground beside their stacked arms. Others were standing at ease watching three of their fellows torturing the boy who had brought provisions to us; torturing him to make him tell the secret of our hiding place.

"'Spare me!' he screamed. '*Madre mia!* I cannot tell! They are wounded men!' and hung moaning from a tree.

"'*Caramba!* A hospital! You're in luck,' cried the lieutenant. 'This will make your promotion, *Capitan Valdez.*'

"'*Diablo!*' answered his superior. 'A victory over a hospital means to me the medal for valor. My dispatch shall read, "No wounded." Take a new rawhide, Domingo, and give the rebel *muchachito* another and a stronger turn.'

"But the gray-headed sergeant saluted respectfully and muttered, 'He can bear no more; he is but a child,' and turned away his head.

"'Obey my orders or I strip the stripes from your sleeves,' commanded the Captain.

"Then the torment began again!

"I cannot describe the scene. I went mad almost myself as I looked at it. It was blows and agony—the victim's screams—the blasphemies of his torturers.

"But the boy did not tell.

"Twice I raised my pistol to shoot the Spanish captain, but that would have betrayed the secret

of our retreat. Twice I raised it, in pity, to still the tortured victim; but I—I thought of his mother, and I could not.

“Suddenly the child suffered no more. Insensibility had made him forget.

“They loosed his bonds.

“A few minutes after the boy sprang up, glared about him and laughed—a maniac laugh. The child had been made insane by torment.

“‘Our secret is safe now,’ thought I, for an instant. But I did not know the cunning of the Spaniards.

“‘Let him alone now. He is a maniac,’ said the captain to his men. ‘Quiet! Don’t lay hands upon him. Then he laughed: ‘*Maniacos* always run to their friends.’

“To my horror, this became the truth!

“The boy fled from his persecutors and ran for protection to those who had been kind to him—to me, the American surgeon and our wounded ones. His insane footsteps guided the Spaniards along the path to—God help me!—our hospital.

“I stopped them at the first turn by killing the Spanish captain. I checked them again as they entered the swamp, by shooting the lieutenant, who was leading. But by this time another company was behind them, and they still came on. A moment after I was among my sentries. No time for concealment now! We called down the glen: ‘Send us every man who can hold a gun or raise a machete!’

“Then the Spaniards came, and we fought to save the helpless. But numbers swept us down the hill. A bullet and machete wound tumbled

me over, down the little declivity. I lay on the ground and ordered the surgeon to put those who could not walk into the boat.

“ ‘Then you go in *first!*’ cried poor Lewis, lifting me to the stern-sheets. Two or three—you saw them—with amputated legs, were put into the skiff as the Spaniards, swooping down the hill, slew the last fighting Cuban. And so came to their joy—their triumph—the hospital, the wounded, the maimed!

“ ‘They had fired one hut; by its light I see Lewis standing in front of them, crying, ‘This place is protected! It flies the Red Cross! I am the surgeon in charge!’

“ ‘By your voice an American. That is your death warrant!’ ” answered a sergeant, and struck him down.

“Then it was the torch and the sword! In the blazing palm-huts I see them now. *O, Madre de Dios!* murdering the helpless, and killing the surgeon, who, as their machetes hacked him to pieces, waved in the faces of his assassins the flag with the Cross of Geneva.

“As his death-cry broke the air, two fugitives dashed into the water and threw themselves into the skiff.

“The next instant our sail caught the breeze; we ran out of the cove, pursued by bullets that struck down those of us who were capable of handling rudder or oar.

“Totally disabled by stiffening wounds, I lay there. The night was cool, the sea breeze refreshing.

“In the morning no land could be seen. Then the

sun came up and poured its burning rays upon the few that lived. They cried for water, and there was none. All day the sun, the merciless sun—the sun I had once loved, but now cursed—glared down upon us and drank our blood, and to me came darkness, and then—nothingness.

“Then I awoke to find the sea breeze rustling the lace curtains at the open windows of a shaded room; to find my body, that had not known a bed for months, resting amid pillows of lace and sheets of linen. The fragrant breath of rose flowers floated about me. There was music sounding softly from a piano in some room below me, an angel was bending over me—and for a moment I thought I was in heaven—but it was America!”

CHAPTER IX.

THE FALSE LIGHTS ON THE KEY.

THE Cuban ceases, leaving a silence broken only by a muttered “Good God!” from old Vanstone. Rex’s cigarette has gone out long ago, and been forgotten. The girls are holding each other’s hands. Estrabon now becomes the dominant element of the scene.

“*Santos y demonios!*” he cries in excited voice, his eyes rolling wildly. “Those Spanish assassins! They kill an American surgeon! For that we must demand blood!”

“Great Scott, Balasco!” ejaculates Vanstone, with the nervous timidity of the financier. “You are not an American citizen, yet you would make war for us.”

"No; I am only Don Estrabon," answers the cigarmaker; "but esteem it an honor to grasp the hand of a man who fought with Maceo." And he becomes effusively bellicose in his utterances, for Miss Indra's eyes glance at him in the sympathy that women—God bless them!—always have for the struggling patriot.

To this young Varona answers, moodily, "Don't let us talk any more about it. If we do, I shall dream of that horrid thing again to-night."

And Gertie cries, "For Heaven's sake, don't excite him! If he gets nervous, I shall have to use hypodermics on my own responsibility! Dr. Granite has gone away."

After this the conversation grows languid; though they are all excited again by old Vanstone, who startles them by suddenly saying: "I am one of the trustees of Bellevue Hospital. I saw young Lewis, the murdered surgeon, graduate, myself, a year ago. This war is coming very close to us."

"Close to *us*?" returns Rex. "We should go close to *it*. They murder American citizens, and our State Department writes *papers* about it."

"Hush! my boy," remarks his father. "Such ideas disturb Wall street."

"*Disturb* Wall street? That's what you are always saying, papa, when anything American comes up," cries Miss Gertie, viciously. Then she goes on, with a philosophy beyond her years: "Besides, I have heard you say that during our great civil war Wall street was in its glory; there was ten times the chance to make a fortune then that there is now."

"Yes; ten times the chance to lose one also,"

laughs Estrabon, who has occasionally been slightly shorn in American speculations.

"And as I have got my fortune," remarks the elder man, "the placid sea of steady interest is more pleasant to me than the raging storm of fluctuating values; that's what I told young Severance," he adds contemplatively, "and so kept that young millionaire out of Wall street."

"I think I'll go to bed," observes Miss Vanstone, rising.

"Won't you stay longer—a little while longer?" murmurs Balasco, anxious for evening *tête-à-tête*.

"No, if you'll excuse me, I will say good-night to everybody; Señor Ramon's story has given me the blues," replies the girl rather moodily and takes her way to her own apartments; where curiously enough she does not go to bed, but sits with her fair cheek on her hand looking out of the open window and gazing toward the North. A moment after tears come into her beautiful eyes. She murmurs "My Billy"—then smites her pretty palms together and addressing herself mutters, "Idiot! Why did I listen to new-women ideas and toss my happiness away!"

Downstairs likewise, the story just told by the Cuban does not add to general conviviality, though Vanstone asks in a casual way if Varona has any suspicion of how the Spaniards gained news of the landing of the *Three Friends* expedition.

"Of course not," answers the young man, then says reflectively, "The Captain-General has as many secret agents in Florida as he has in Havana."

"Spies *here*—in this country?" falters Gertie impressed. "Why you may be in danger even now!"

And the girl, as if half frightened, bids the rest of the party good-night, and then goes slowly upstairs.

She is met at the door of her chamber by Indra, who apparently has no thought of somnolence. She remarks, suggestively: "Do you think you will sleep, Gertie? That kind of story is not a good thing to go to bed on," and gets a shock in return.

Gertie puts up a pathetic face, and shudders: "Oh! if they had killed Ramon, I would have died;" then darts into her room and would close the door, but her sister is after her.

"Don't be foolish," the elder says, soothingly. "If they had killed Ramon, you would never have known him."

"Not *known* Ramon? It seems as if I have known him all my life."

"Nonsense! You are too young to talk that way, Miss Gray-hairs. You are not seventeen years."

"No; not seventeen," whispers Miss First-Love, with pathetic voice, "but the awful danger over Ramon is making an old woman of me very fast." Then she shudders: "Do you think he will go back to battle and to death?"

"Not if Varona knows when he has a good thing," answers the elder sister, looking significantly at the younger one, for Gertie is as pretty as seventeen can be, and in a year or two gives promise of even greater loveliness.

As for the object of these remarks, on the ver-

anda below, surrounded by the gentlemen, he smokes a cigarette contemplatively. And for the matter of that, so do the others.

But the silence is broken in upon by Rex, exclaiming, "By Jove! That's curious!"

"What?" asks his father.

"The light on that island! I never saw a glimmer on Coral Key before."

"Nor I either. Somebody must be fishing for turtle over there," replies Mr. Vanstone.

"Coral Key?" cries the Don, excitedly, his eye following the boy's hand, that points at a gleam which comes from a torch or lantern some two miles away. For he remembers the tale told him by Mastic in their interview at Key West about Alligator Pete having seen a beacon on this island.

"*Caramba!*" ejaculates Varona. "There are *three* lights now. See them, in a triangle. It reminds me of the signals we waved to the *Three Friends* when she made landing near Cabañas."

Then they all strain their eyes, but the gloom is too intense, and they only see three lights, that finally grow into a line and then disappear.

But this careless remark of Ramon sets the Don thinking. He has had vague information of a Cuban depot of arms and ammunition in the neighborhood of Emerald Key. "This may be the place." He thinks: "I will sail over and take a look at the island."

Then gazing at the young man sitting beside him, he gives a start and wonders, "What would Varona do if he guessed that I had been instrumental in bringing his misfortunes upon him."

"Well, as the lights have gone out," remarks

Vanstone, rising, "I think I will turn in. Señor Ramon, your story has given us all the blues. But to-morrow morning, my man, we will be in the modern world again. Beauty and fashion are coming to us from Palm Beach."

"And have you not beauty enough here?" laughs the young Cuban.

"And to spare!" cries Balasco. "Señor Vanstone, I cannot permit your slighting your two beautiful daughters. You should be a happy man." Then, with a kindly glance of his eye at the father of the young lady he has decreed shall be his bride, Don Estrabon goes cheerily up to bed to dream a dream, as gorgeous as ever came to opium eater, of the beautiful creature who he has ordained shall come into his life, give him her loveliness and be his very own—a glorious vision, that shall turn to hideous nightmare on the morrow.

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTY FROM PALM BEACH.

BUT not knowing what is before him, Don Balasco sleeps the sleep of the blessed, to awake early the next morning bright, happy, and vivacious.

He sings a gay Spanish ditty as he makes his ablutions, and murmurs, "Another day with *her!*" then puts on a childish pout, and says: "Bah Those fashionables are coming from Palm Beach to interrupt *our* love!" and goes down to his steam-launch, which is moored to the little landing

stage, as happy, *debonnaire* and blithesome a Hidalgo as ever doffed *sombrero* or kissed the hand of ladies fair.

In this cheerful mood he smokes his cigar while his men are getting up steam on the *Figaro*, and this being done, and receiving orders for the same, the engineer puts headway on the launch, while Balasco's negro helmsman, under the Don's directions, puts the head of the boat for Coral Key, the island on which the lights have been the night before.

It is a short journey, and the steam-launch, a pretty quick craft over these quiet waters, makes the trip in about fifteen minutes.

During this time the Don puts searching eyes upon the island of which he has suspicions, but finds nothing to make him think the lights came from anything more than some wandering turtle-fishers' or sponge-gatherers' boats. Finally, though he gives a mocking grimace at his dainty patent leathers, he makes landing on the key.

The island is about half a mile in length and five hundred yards in width, running longitudinally—north and south. The center of it is sand, in which its few pine trees have contrived to fix their roots. Around most of its shores is a dense thicket of mangroves and buttonwood, though toward the south the sand runs into a low grassy meadow, over which hundreds of snipe are flying.

In contrast to this, on the north side of the island, for a space of some two hundred feet, quite a prominent reef rises two or three feet higher than the rest of the island. Immediately beside

this is a tide channel, in which the current runs deep and strong, having—so the Spaniard calculates—some fifteen or twenty feet of water.

It is this portion of the island that Alligator Pete had spoken of to his companion a few mornings ago as a first-rate docking spot, and here the Don makes his landing.

Near here he sees traces of man. The ashes of a fire, two or three pieces of half consumed buttonwood, and a lot of boot-tracks in the soft sand further inland. These indicate that the day before the island had been occupied, probably by some fishing party or hunting excursion.

Estrabon searches as well as he is able through the pine trees, but discovers nothing. The mangrove and buttonwood thickets bid defiance to his patent leathers.

So after a few minutes' investigation, he makes up his mind, if he does anything more about it, to place the matter in the hands of Mastic, who is still under his orders at Key West, and has lately been attempting, at the Don's suggestion, to discover what has become of an American schooner, by name the *Competitor*, that a few days before had suddenly made mysterious disappearance from the waters of that harbor.

During his researches, Balasco has partly forgotten the joy in his heart; but as his boat on its return rounds the corner of the island, and Emerald Key comes into view, there is a flutter of white garments in the rose gardens surrounding Vanstone's house, and looking at them, Estrabon's face glows with delight, and he murmurs: "*Estellamia!*"

The distance is altogether too great for recognition, but his heart tells him it is Indra Vanstone.

Very soon he has proof of the same, for the young lady, noticing the approaching boat, runs down to the end of the little wharf, waves welcoming hand and puts him on fire with graceful gestures, and enchanting voice.

"*Dentro de poco*," he cries, "and I am with you!" his eyes sparkling with admiration, as he steps on the landing stage.

For Indra Vanstone is very beautiful this morning, as she stands on the wharf, the sun lighting her face, the breeze playing little tricks with her light, floating summer dress, outlining the delicate yet rounded contours of her graceful form, and giving glimpses of exquisite feet and delicious ankles. She wears something that is white as snow, with light pink ribbons and pink flowers. Even her pretty feet are encased in little boots of the same delicate color. Her face is roses and lilies, save the blue eyes that beam with kindly gleam on Don Balasco this soft spring morning.

But it is not her beauty that enchants her admirer entirely. The girl has a charm of manner before which nearly all men bow down, and best of all, it comes from a good heart, noble soul, and generous disposition.

"Your boat goes to Key West to-day?" Miss Vanstone calls from the wharf.

"It is at your orders."

"And returns this evening?"

"It will come back at any time you like."

"Then don't let them forget the Cuban musicians

who will play for the fandango this evening," says the girl, in happy voice.

"The musicians shall be here," replies the Don, ceremoniously, from the float on which he has just made landing. "Your will is my will; your command is my law." And he bows to her with old school formality.

"Yes," replies the young lady, airily, as she watches her devotee climb the steps to the wharf. "Every one generally does about what I want them to. It is a way I have."

And she speaks the truth, for Indra is one of those blessed girls who have their own way with fathers and mothers, and who will have their own way with lovers and husbands; who have been taught by our modern system, which flourishes in America, that the world is theirs, that it is their place to dominate it, that they are to be worshipped and adored by the mother who bore them, the father who begot them, the lover who woos them and the husband who marries them; to which place of goddess and command the beautiful daughters of America take very complaisantly and contentedly.

"Very well, now that the music is off my mind," prattles Miss Vanstone, as the Don joins her on the wharf, "would you take me to breakfast? I'm very hungry. You must be also, Señor Balasco, after a morning voyage."

Then, as they stroll toward the house, she asks with some interest: "What did you find on Coral Key? I saw a number of men there the other day with my marine glass, from the deck of the *Flying Fish*?"

"What were they doing?" This is an eager question from the gentleman.

"Carrying lots of things about. I could not tell exactly what, even with the telescope. It must have been turtles or bundles of sponges they wanted to dry," continues the girl, reflectively; then adds, "Yes, I think it might have been turtles. Do turtle shells ever glisten in the sun?"

"Quite frequently," answers Estrabon, though this information decides him to put the government detective on the matter at once.

By this time the two have wandered into the house.

"You have some flowers in your hand," remarks the Don, suggestively.

"Yes. Would you like one?" says Indra, suddenly, as her taper fingers extend a dainty rosebud to the fascinated gentleman.

In taking it from her, his hand for a second clasps hers, and Miss Indra Vanstone, catching the glance of his eyes, sees something in them that makes her a little bashful—perchance, a little nervous. She suddenly, almost affrightedly, draws back.

"What is the matter?" murmurs the Spaniard.

"A—a thorn pierced my finger," stammers Indra; then goes on merrily, "But I—I smell the coffee," and leads the way to the dining-room.

Here the Don is welcomed by the party at the table with considerable cordiality, Miss Gertrude observing, "We almost waited breakfast for you," and giving him a kindly glance; for she remembers this Spanish gentleman the night before complimented her hero on having fought with Maceo.

Into this complimentary business the Don now plunges again, saying, as he sips his coffee; "Lieutenant Varona, I presume you go back to the Island as soon as your wounds are healed. Cuba has need of such as you."

"Yes; I must get to work as soon as possible," answers the young man, though his sentence, which begins cheerily, ends with a slight sigh. "It is hard," he continues, "to turn my back upon civilization; for ours is at best but a military privation of the most severe kind, in the mountain camps of the Cuban army. Still I must do my duty—and *à propos* of that, Don Balasco, you are interested in fitting out expeditions which land arms on the Cuban coast. As soon as I am in good fighting order, you must give me a chance to join one of them—the *Three Friends*, for instance. She is a quick vessel—a lucky vessel. Cuba will some day erect a monument to that ship and her captain. See if you can get me a passage upon her."

"I will try," answers Estrabon, softly. "I should like very much to know the time the *Three Friends* sails and where she makes her landing."

Now this kind of conversation has an awful effect upon poor Gertie. The girl looks pleadingly upon this hero, whom she has nursed to life, and thinks, in dazed horror: "Every mouthful of beef-steak Ramon puts down his throat to give him health and strength takes him nearer to danger and death and—farther from me."

Her youthful nerves would possibly break down under the strain of the breakfast table, for the lieutenant has a mighty appetite this morning, and the girl is even now gulping her batter-cakes in a

pathetic, tear-in-her-eye way, did not Rex, who is on the veranda, put his head through one of the open windows and cry out: "Hurrah! The *Flying Fish* is in sight! Come and help the ladies on shore!"

So the whole party very shortly drift out on the piazza to look at the coming yacht, and a few minutes after walk to the wharf to greet the coming guests.

At the landing Don Estrabon, who is in advance of the Vanstone family, occupies himself in dispatching his launch to Key West, intrusting to his negro engineer a note he has hastily written to the revenue detective.

"If there is anything the matter with that island," thinks the putative friend of Cuba, "with my hints Mastic will be sure to discover it."

Then there come to him in chorus, exclamations of greeting in feminine accents, mingled with an excited "Thanks; yes, I'm still alive!" from little Vortex, and a manly "How are you all?" from big Jack Blakely.

Balasco turns toward the *Flying Fish*, which is already beside the wharf. Upon her deck are dashing gentlemen and pretty women, who seem to bring to this lonely isle northern fashion and place it in touch with the bustling world. But the Don thinks, with a contemptuous Pish! "These new birds of fine plumage do not compare with her," gazing with all his eyes at Indra as she trips on board to welcome her guests.

And Estrabon is right, for though Mrs. Ormiston, as she steps down the gangplank and extends a daintily gloved hand to old Mr. Vanstone, is in

as perfect a yachting costume as man milliner ever designed for the female form, and pretty little Ethel Rivers, of Baltimore, is as piquant an *élève* as that beauty-breeding city ever turned out, and Flora Woodbridge, who is of a more magnificent kind, having a Boston primness in her manner, is gowned, booted, gloved, and adorned with all the art of modern dressmaking, none of them can vie with the girl who, in simple white summer gown, plays their dainty hostess.

But the party on the wharf and the steam-yacht—for they are now mingled together—careless of any emotions they rouse in Don Balasco's soul, are very busy indulging in the greetings of well-bred people who hope to kill time together for a pleasant few days.

All three of the arriving ladies put interested eyes upon Lieutenant Varona, and grow even excited over him when they hear Miss Gertie announce *sotto voce*, "He is a wounded hero who has fought with Maceo."

But even as she greets him, Mrs. Ormiston's eyes turn from Ramon and become fixed upon the picturesque figure of Estrabon, who strolls up the steps leading from the little dock, and passing over the wharf, is soon shaking hands with the ladies of the party, to whom Miss Vanstone rapidly introduces him.

"So very pleased to meet you, Don Balasco," remarks the widow, turning to him. "You seldom come to New York, but I heard of you at Tampa."

"Yes," rejoins the Spaniard, "I rarely visit your metropolis, except on business. Though I had

the pleasure—the honor—of seeing you one evening in a *parterre* box at the Metropolitan Opera House, my lorgnette following those of all the gentlemen about me.”

“Ah, if we had only *met* in New York!” cries the pretty widow, her eyes lighting up, she being very well pleased with this compliment from a gentleman whose dark eyes seem decidedly fascinating as he stands before her.

For Amy Ormiston is a widow who is a long way the right side of thirty, and has by no means given up the hopes of a second, yea, even of a third, husband, if Providence will put him in her way.

“Ah, that was my misfortune—one I feel more deeply now that I have heard your voice and kissed your hand,” lisps Estrabon softly; for this gentleman is always very polite to ladies.

“Very well, then; we must make up for lost time,” observes the widow cheerily, and the Don finds himself, *nolens volens*, her escort to the house, though he turns his head several times to look at Miss Indra Vanstone, who is now on the deck of the yacht chatting with the other ladies, about whom little Vortex, a young gentleman of vivacious manner, small voice, and exquisite garments, has been darting, iterating every few moments with varying inflexions:

“Awfully jolly trip, don’t yer know. Nevah saw anything like it nevah before. The deck of a yacht’s so romantic, don’t yer twig? There’s no telling what desperate love affairs Blakely and I might not have had with the young ladies had not Mrs. Ormiston been the most dragon-like of chaperons.”

Effusive suggestions that are glared upon with haughty eyes by the two young ladies of the voyage, and greeted by a contemptuous "Come now, little chap, don't make a bigger fool of yourself than you are," from Jack Blakely, a stalwart Bostonian, who is assisting Miss Rivers over the gangplank.

But little Vortex is one of the kind of creatures who will not be denied, and who, quite often, from very persistency, gets hold of the belle of some concourse he chances to grace, generally to the fair one's rage and despair.

This happens now. Miss Vanstone, who is much more affable than the others, finds herself compelled to accept the attentions of the little gentleman, who very proudly escorts her over the gangplank, Joe Thomas, the bluff skipper of the *Flying Fish*, gazing after him with evil eye, and remarking, with sea-dog frankness, "I'm —— glad to get rid of *him*!"

A few minutes after they are all in the house, where, over the luncheon, which is quite a merry affair, Miss Indra explains her plan of a picnic cruise.

This is generally received with decided favor.

"We'll sail all about the islands," she says, "eastward to Key Largo, and perhaps even as far west as the Dry Tortugas. On some of the islands we can camp at night."

"Out in the open? That will be bracing and athletic," remarks Miss Woodbridge.

"Oh, I could not think of that," chimes in little Ethel Rivers. "There might be snakes!" This last is said with a *moue* that she knows is fetching,

and is addressed quite pleadingly to big Jack Blakely, who sits beside her.

"As to that, you must do as you please. You can have a stateroom on the yacht, or a blanket on the ground. *Chacun à son goût*," suggests Don Balasco.

"It will be ah—most exquisitely romantic! Ladies' eyes around a camp-fire! You mustn't go wandering about, though, at night; I might mistake your eyes for *dear* eyes. There are deer on the islands, don't yer twig?" This is a horrid attempt at wit from little Vortex, who has a punster's and a sportsman's ambition in his small body.

"If they let you live after that," jeers Rex, "and you're so keen for gunning, I can give you some this afternoon. Don Balasco tells me there are lots of snipe over on Coral Key. Are you up to a try at them this afternoon?"

"I would say yes in a moment, my deah boy; but—er—I'm afraid—er—the ladies may have claims this—er—afternoon."

"Oh, we can live without you for a few hours," sneers Flora Woodbridge.

"And then, you know, I'm dying to eat something you have killed," adds Miss Rivers. "Everybody has heard of your shooting, but nobody has ever seen your game."

"Nevah seen my game!" screams Vortex. Then he replies to Rex, "Done, with you, my boy!" and adds, "Ladies, you shall have snipe for breakfast to-morrow, or my eyeglasses are not true!"

So it is hastily arranged that the picnic cruise commences in a day or two, and will be conducted

on Bohemian and *al fresco* principles. At night, those who want to sleep in the open can do so, and those who so elect can bunk comfortably on the yacht.

"I never heard of a picnic cruise before," remarks their host, as they rise from the table. "I suppose it is new-fangled, and, therefore, the proper fad. But don't all you girls come back from it engaged. Remember, I'm a widower, and, therefore, in the market."

"We've been thinking of that ever since we left Palm Beach," says Miss Woodbridge, with such candid innocence that every one grows merry, and the Spaniard the merriest of them all.

For as they step from the room his fair young hostess, favoring his coat sleeve with the light touch of patrician fingers, says, confidentially, to him, "As soon as I have made the others comfortable for the afternoon, come with me and we will run down, inspect the *Flying Fish*, and make arrangements for the picnic cruise;" then adds, in tones that make Balasco think that even now he is master of this exquisite creature, with all her goods, chattels, and effects, "I am going to leave the details in your hands. You shall be grand master of ceremonies, only be sure you put in lots of Spanish romance." And so trips blithely after her guests, to do what she can to give them a happy afternoon.

As for the Don, happiness is already his—he smokes his *cigarro* and whistles merrily, and murmurs, "*Santos!* Estrabon, you are a devil of a fellow."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DANCE AT EMERALD KEY.

BUT being a devil of a fellow has its disadvantages. Ladies very frequently demand attention from this kind of a gentleman; among them Amy Ormiston.

The fair widow has become interested in the somewhat foreign airs and graces of Don Estrabon. She knows he is generally considered well to do, having a large factory in Key West and a big branch house in New York. He is handsome, refined, and bizarre, being a tremendous contrast to the gentleman she first called lord and master, who was prim, dried up, methodical, and Yankee.

Taking possession of the most secluded hammock under the broad portico, this lady contrives to bring about a *tête-à-tête* with the Spaniard; though despite the widow's charms—and she is very attractive—Don Balasco, as he smokes his cigarette, cannot help turning his eyes toward the object of his affections as she trips about, gayly chatting with her guests and trying to make them all happy and at home in their new surroundings.

Under her influence the party make a pleasant, languid, tropical afternoon of it, for the day has grown quite hot. A few go into the billiard-room to play a lazy game. One or two of the ladies make themselves picturesque in hammocks on the veranda, and do a little flirting in an off-hand, innocent manner—a species of game at which *la*

petite Rivers is an adept ; although this afternoon Amy Ormiston easily takes the lead.

Despite her fascinations, the Don smokes his cigarette in an restless, break-away-from-the-bit manner that is not very complimentary to the charming widow, who, as she lies in her hammock, knowing she is in the very best position to display the beauties of both face and figure, wonders what is the matter with the man.

A few minutes after they are disturbed by Rex and Mr. Vortex coming downstairs ; the first in a rough-and-tumble costume of high boots with trousers tucked into them, and blue flannel shirt ; the other in more elaborate sportsman's costume, which looks as if it had never seen powder, but has yellow leather gaiters, and shooting-coat with many pockets. For Mr. Vortex always travels with elaborate wardrobe ; his three large trunks having given the captain of the *Flying Fish* more disgust than all the Saratogas of the ladies.

Both the young men shoulder double-barreled shotguns, and are apparently bound for Coral Key and snipe.

Soon one of the little sail-boats takes them on their way, and shortly after Amy permits the Don to go his way, thinking, "For such a picturesque creature he is decidedly uninteresting."

Relieved from his thralldom, Balasco very shortly joins the group about Miss Vanstone, who almost immediately makes him very happy by strolling by his side to the big stairs that connect the portico with the great shell walk that leads through the garden toward the landing and saying brightly: "Come, Don Estrabon ! I have given

directions for the yacht to be kept at the wharf. We will run down together and settle things with Captain Thomas about our cruise. You are to have full charge of it."

"I am always under your orders," replies Balasco, gallantly, and no prouder gentleman ever trod gangplank than the gallant Spaniard as he assists his inamorata, who trips blithely beside him, onto the snowy deck of the trim little steam vessel, to be received by its bluff skipper with a naval salute.

"Captain Thomas, we've come on board to tell you that to-morrow we begin our great picnic cruise!" announces the young lady.

"Picnic cruise? What the devil is that? I beg your pardon, Miss, but I don't exactly understand you," stammers the sea-dog. "I've heard of picnics, and I've taken cruises, but I never saw the two mixed. Won't it be something like putting a mounted cowboy on the quarter-deck? One goes for land and the other goes for sea, and it don't seem to me they'll mix!"

"My dear Captain," replies Estrabon, "this is an age of invention."

"And this is my invention!" cries Indra excitedly, and then goes on to describe the details of the affair to the mariner, who appears distrustful of the novelty.

"Well," remarks the captain, "you give me good anchorage at night and I'll take care of you. We've got plenty of supplies on board, and a cook that would make a seasick man hungry. Though I suppose we will need some fresh meats in the icebox."

"Meats, poultry, game and liquors will come on board to-morrow," says Miss Vanstone, authoritatively.

"Yes; plenty of liquors! Grog is always necessary on a yacht," chuckles the captain, remarking significantly, "No temperance crowd ever sailed on board a vessel of the New York Yacht Squadron."

This is received with such hearty merriment that the sailor of the sea is made thoroughly complaisant.

"As for the fish," he continues, "you can get all you want over that taffrail, by tossing a line into the water. I'm a little short-handed, but for a cruise on this mill-pond, I reckon I have enough to handle the craft. Would you like to figure upon how many we can bunk?"

"That would probably be best," replies the Spaniard, and under the captain's escort the two make a short inspection of the yacht, which is a very seaworthy and fast craft, and, for a vessel of her size, has a good deal of deck-room, as her deck-house contains only the saloon, which is used as a dining-room, being very prettily furnished with bird's-eye maple. Forward of this and connecting with it is a small pilot-house, though there is an extra wheel at the stern that can be used if occasion demands. Two little brass guns, for saluting, are mounted forward. From the deck-house a companionway leads to a ladies' cabin below, from which open three handsomely appointed staterooms, the owner's connecting with a boudoir and bathroom. All these are fitted up in light woods, and have standing bedsteads in them. The

saloon above them can have its lockers transformed into berths for gentlemen. Another companionway farther aft permits the ladies to enter their cabin without passing through the saloon. Altogether, the yacht can easily accommodate the younger members of the Vanstone family and their guests for a short cruise.

While this inspection is going on, a little incident happens that puts the romantic Spaniard into a fervor of excited bliss. Miss Indra, looking through the pretty state cabins with their blue draperies, remarks, in her careless, offhand, American way, "This would be just the craft for a honeymoon cruise."

"Great Scott!" ejaculates Thomas. "You ain't thinking of getting spliced, Miss, are you?"

"Not immediately," replies the young lady, a little blush flying over her face as she runs up the companionway into the saloon on deck.

Balasco, standing below, devours the graceful creature with eyes that shine and glow, as he murmurs to himself, "*Mi querida!* She meant that for me. Ah, these American girls! They fascinate you, they woo you. *Dueñas* do not stand beside them to still the beating of your heart!"

These thoughts would give the girl a fearful start, if she knew them, for this gentleman suddenly murmurs to himself, "To-morrow morning I shall tell him she adores me and shall demand her hand from her father."

Perchance Balasco would do it this very day, did not some words the young lady chances to hear soon after they have strolled off the wharf make Miss Indra more retiring, less vivacious,

and perchance not so eager for gentlemen's society this afternoon.

As they return from the yacht, the young lady and her cavalier pass by Mrs. Ormiston, who is not altogether pleased at being deserted by the Don, though she has not considered him particularly entertaining. As she reclines in her hammock, the widow looks up from a magazine, and, beckoning to Indra, whispers in the girl's ear: "What would *he* say?"

"Say what? I don't know who you're talking about," returns Miss Vanstone, lightly.

"Why, Mr. Severance, of course," laughs the lady. "I have been looking for him to lounge onto the portico at Emerald Key all day. You know I saw him at Jacksonville two weeks ago, and supposed he must then be on his way to you."

"I have not seen Mr. Severance for several months," remarks Indra, coolly; though, despite herself, there is a slight quiver in her voice. Then she trips on to join the Spaniard, who is waiting for her, some little distance away on the veranda. But Indra does not remain with Balasco very long.

On the plea of making preparations for the evening, she very shortly withdraws from general society, and going up to her room, sits at her window and gazes toward the north. There are tears in her bright eyes, and once or twice she wrings her pretty hands despairingly, and sighs, "My Billy--my Billy!--God help me!--My Billy."

As for the lady who has given her young hostess

this stiletto-in-the-back information, she looks rather curiously at the girl's vanishing figure, and thinks: "I wonder if I have put a bad finger into Don Estrabon's love-pie;" she having read the Spaniard's heart much more truly than Indra Vanstone.

So the day drifts along to dinner, after which the invited locals from the neighboring keys will arrive and the dancing will begin.

To this meal of ceremony the ladies come down in light, delicate, floating, shimmering *costumes-de-bal* that give full effect to ivory shoulders and snowy arms; and Indra Vanstone glides in to make a sensation.

"Ah, she is in a class by herself," whispers Gertie to Estrabon. Then she laughs playfully, "Indra's rigged up to dazzle somebody to-night—guess who?"

A query that makes the Don stroke his long mustachios, perchance conceitedly, as he looks upon the radiant vision in an astounded sort of way. For the ethereal loveliness of the girl simply stuns him.

The first time he had met her she had seemed to him as if attired in the waves of the sea. Now she floats about in clouds and rainbows of tropical sunset. Her dress is one of those indescribable ones. No modiste's memoranda can do it justice. It is simply effects—*effects*—EFFECTS!—gauzy, floating, cloudlike, of half a dozen different rainbow hues; each move of the girl's exquisite figure, about which it floats, giving it new tints, new combinations of color. From out it rise shoulders of ivory, that support the fair neck and

beautiful head of the girl, from which two eyes gleam like blue stars of purest ray. Her arms are white as snow. Her rounded maiden bosom gleams in the soft waxlights. In pose she is an ivory statue, draped with nebulæ and surrounded by rainbows; in action she is vivacity, mirth, merriment, happiness personified, for Miss Indra Vanstone has thrown away the blues—at least for this evening.

But the other young ladies look very pretty also, the dinner is remarkably good, the wines are excellent, mirth is contagious, and they all get to chatting very merrily, as course follows course and vintage follows vintage.

"Though we are not going to have a large dance this evening," prattles Indra to Jack Blakely, who sits beside her, it is going to be a select and rather a romantic one." Then she murmurs to the Spanish gentleman, who is on her other hand: "You have not forgotten the musicians, I hope, Don Estrabon?"

"They have already arrived from Key West," returns that cavalier. "I hinted to them to wear the Cuban costume for the benefit of Señor Varona. If he will close his eyes he will think he is dancing the cachucha with some rustic maid of *Cuba Libre*."

"Machete wounds bar my cachucha, which was considered quite agile in the Rubi mountains," laughs the young man. "I may hobble through a quadrille, however."

"That is very unfortunate," says Miss Gertie. "We are so short of cavaliers." Then her eyes run around the dinner table and she exclaims:

"Good gracious! Where are Rex and Mr. Vortex?"

"They've not come in yet from snipe-shooting," remarks Blakely.

"Yes, I thought the house was very quiet," observes Vanstone. "They'll be hungry and come in soon."

Despite the absence of the two sportsmen, the meal draws to a satisfactory finish.

Leaving the gentlemen to their after-dinner cigars, the ladies step out on the veranda to utter exclamations of delight; for the grounds are illuminated with Chinese lanterns, and the billiard-room and bowling-alley, where they will do the dancing, are a blaze of light. From them come the strains of the mandolin, guitar and violins, soft and tropical—the music of love, the music of the dance—the music that has a tenderness and romance peculiar to the music of no other land under the sun—the music of Cuba and of Spain.

A moment later, Mr. Vanstone, stepping to his daughter's side, remarks, "Our neighbors are beginning to arrive." For a naphtha launch comes puffing round a near-by islet, with a merry little party from Matacomba.

"It's the Jacksons, of Cincinnati, and of pineapple fame!" cries Gertie, who is now beside her sister; then she adds plaintively, "But the Jacksons are all girls!"

This plethora of the fair sex is shortly balanced by a snorting tugboat, foaming along with screaming whistle, which brings a stag party from Key West, young De Soto, the sponge magnate, and George Jameston, and Rafael Fernandez, of cigar

fame, together with a couple of engineer officers, in shoulder straps and military blazonry, from Fort Taylor. Then a fleet of light sailing craft, whose moving lights make the waters brilliant, seem to come from everywhere, bringing lots of laughing girls and dashing young gentlemen.

A few minutes after they are all in the billiard room, which is changed into a *salle de danse*. Most of the young ladies are very pretty. All of them have on their "best bib and tucker," and when Vanstone senior, leads off the first quadrille with the young widow, to the music of that delightful little Spanish opera-bouffe called "High Life in Madrid," the ballroom, though its guests are gathered from the four corners of the Union and perchance are not altogether homogeneous, looks gay, vivacious, and busy. The ladies are delighted because there are plenty of men—something unusual in Florida ballrooms—and every man of them is *dancing*.

The Cuban musicians add to the color and picturesqueness of the scene. On a little platform surrounded by palms and adorned by flowers, these exiles of flashing eyes, decked out in the finery of their native island, give out their soft, rhythmic, sensuous music, that "sets the heart dancing," as Miss Rivers remarks to her partner, young Fernandez, of Boca Chica.

But of all that laughing, chatting, dancing throng, Estrabon is the happiest. His eyes flash with joy and triumph; he feels like a conqueror—a conqueror in the game of love—as his arm for the first time surrounds the delicate waist of Indra Vanstone and for the first time her heart beats,

against his. It is a contact that makes him almost delirious, for he feels, as he floats to the music of the *Estudiantia*, that he holds her who will be his bride within his arms.

So the ball goes on. After a little Balasco insists on showing them all the cachucha, dancing the same with Miss Indra, though there are some bright-eyed señoritas present—an affair which, inspired by love and music, he executes with dashing abandon, being very well seconded by his fair partner, who dances—as most American girls do—very gracefully, and has a deft way of tossing her pretty feet about in perfect time and exquisite motion to any tune that may come along.

CHAPTER XII.

LITTLE VORTEX HAS AN ADVENTURE.

BUT this scene of revelry is suddenly destroyed!

Little Vortex comes striding into the ballroom and gasps "Look at me!" and the ladies give faint screams and the gentlemen snicker. For little Cortright is a most un-ballroom figure. His shooting costume bears evidence of swamp mud *ad libitum*. One of his beautiful patent leather gaiters no longer adorns him; the other hangs by a single button. His agonized face has thorn scratches upon it and dried blood. Altogether he is a figure that suggests desperate adventure and hairbreadth escape.

"Good heavens! What's the matter?" cries Vanstone.

"Pirates!" whispers the erstwhile dapper sportsman, a sort of cold sweat in his tones.

"Oh, mercy! Where's Rex?" screams Indra, excitedly.

"They have not killed him?" falters Gertie.

"No; he's hungry, and has gone to the house for dinner. But it was pirates just the same."

"What miserable rubbish are you giving us?" sneers big Blakely savagely, turning on the little gentleman, whose eccentricities he knows. "At Palm Beach it was crocodiles; here it is pirates. O, shades of Captain Kidd!"

To this a cocoanut grower from Plantation Key adds, gravely, "Captain Kidd was buried two hundred years ago. We have his grave on our island."

"Well, it was pirates or filibusters, just the same!" asserts Mr. Vortex, who will insist on sensation. "Don't I look like it?" he shrieks.

"Filibusters? They must be bound for Cuba! Perhaps I can join them," says Varona, excitedly, and brings dismay upon the young lady who has nursed him to life.

"You would join—that horrid crew?" stammers Vortex, amazed. Then he goes on decidedly: "But you can't do it, don't yer see. The *Three Friends* is well on her way to Cuba. That's the name of that awful ship. Gracious! How she did scoot!"

"The *Three Friends*?" ejaculates Balasco. "I must learn of her. Tell me your story, my little *amigo*."

"Of course! That's what I'm missing my dinner for!" answers Cortright, eagerly, and tells the truth. For this little gentleman likes to pose as the

hero of extraordinary adventures, and has already opened his mouth several times to break forth into narrative, but excited questions have interrupted his flow of soul.

"I say! Could you give me a glass of brandy, first?" he mutters. "It's quite a longish story, and I'm a little faint——"

"To be sure," laughs a Key West sponge magnate, and runs into the room devoted to refreshments to bring forth a full glass of *eau de vie*.

"That's rather stiffish," murmurs the little chap, as he pours it down his throat, and begins:

"You—er—you all know—er—how keen I am for sport," he says. "I have climbed some of the peaks of the Rockies for a chance at big-horns."

"And never bagged one," interjects Blakely. "What has your love of sport to do with pirates, anyway?"

"Hush! Don't stop him!" is cried by excited feminine voices; and very bright, beautiful and anxious eyes glare at the scoffing interrupter.

To them the little gentleman deprecatingly lifts a small but muddy hand and says plaintively: "Have I got to commence all over again? Well, as I said before, I'm so keen for sport, I've hunted game pretty nearly the world over. To-day I was so anxious to have some to present to you young ladies about here for breakfast to-morrow morning, that I tore myself away and fortunately bagged some. There are no end of snipe over there on Coral Key. We got over there all right, and were having a lovely time; had bagged three dozen brace of yellow legs offhand. I had shot up toward the northern end of the island, and was

skirting a heavy thicket, when suddenly—you know the place is supposed to be uninhabited—I thought I saw a deer moving in the bushes. With gun in my hand, to see, is to shoot!—instinct of the sportsman, don't yer know! In a second I drew up my double-barrel and poured both loads of No. 10 shot into the bushes.

"Then something awful happened. A wild Irish voice screamed: 'Holy Moses! he's wounded me in,—in the—you'll excuse me, ladies—in the—a—a—hind quarters!'

"The noise of the inferno seemed to suddenly spring up from that silent thicket. The island seemed to be alive with desperadoes. A great big whiskered brute, with long mustachios, sprang out on me, crying '*Caramba! Maldito diablo!* You pepper me wid shoot!'

"I fled, but after me in hot pursuit were one hundred ruffians who had been concealed in that thicket. I dropped my gun, bounded for life through the jungle, tore through briar patches and, hiding myself in mud and water, lay panting under a mangrove bush while they hunted for me.

"Finally they found me.

"A commanding sort of gentleman presented a pair of fists at my head and said in broken English, 'Come out of dar!—Dey won't let us carry de arms yet, or I would explode de pistol at you.'

"'Don't frighten him to death,' jeered another in good English. 'He doesn't look like a revenue officer or a Spanish spy. He is only a dude sportsman, and has peppered Pat McGuire and Sanchez Esterdillo with a few snipe shot.'

"Then I was surrounded by such a brigand-

looking crowd, regular Fra Diavolo Italian-ban-dit fellows. Most of them were smoking cigarettes, but not a man of them had a gun in sight. The leader came up to me, and said in perfect English: 'I believe I had the pleasure of meeting you up at the Ponce de Leon, Mr. Vortex.'

"'Oh, by Jove! I remember you now; your name is Alvarez,' I remarked. 'You were the man the government detectives were shadowing at St. Augustine.'

"'May I take the liberty of asking what you are doing here on this island?' he asked.

"'Yes; I'm snipe-shooting.'

"'It is rather unfortunate,' he said, 'that this should have happened to-day. We may have to detain you for a few hours, Señor Vortex.'

"'Good gracious!' I said. 'What will the Vanstones say? I couldn't miss their hop to-night. And what will the young ladies think if their brother doesn't come back?'

"'Their brother! You have some one with you on the island?' exclaimed my St. Augustine friend. Then he suddenly gave orders, 'Get hold of the other fellow before he slips into his boat and gets away.'

"So about twenty bandits went down to where Rex was shooting, at the southern end of the island, and after a short interview he came back with them laughing, but quite excited. 'Give you away!' he cried to the leader. 'I wouldn't do it for Grover Cleveland. We Americans are with you!'

"Then he laughed at me and said: 'So you've been potting Cuban patriots, you old Weyler,

you!" It was an unfortunate remark for me. How one or two of them who didn't understand English glared at me.

"The leader of them is somewhat of a humorist, for he remarked to me, 'My dear Señor Vortex, the guard who is placed over you speaks only Spanish. Consequently no explanations will save your life if you attempt to escape.'

"But not a beggar of them was armed.

"Then suddenly, you know, a most surprising thing occurred. A steamer glided cautiously, with scarcely moving propeller up to the Coral reef at the north of the island.

"Her description?" asks Balasco, very eagerly.

"Oh, she is a kind of a largish tugboat, with two little masts stuck over her and a cabin on deck running from one mast to the other, and a pilot-house over it, and a single smokestack."

"The *Three Friends*!" cries Varona. "I recognize her. God bless and protect her, the *Three Friends*."

And the crowd, which is generally Cuban in its sympathies, gives a cheer, the ladies clapping their hands.

"Then what was done?" mutters Estrabon, hoarsely.

"Then you know, she ran right up alongside the reef and was loaded with coal in sacks on all the fore part of the deck. They put a couple of heavy gangplanks ashore. Suddenly all of the pirate beggars became very busy, bearing boxes and cases from the recesses of the thicket on to the boat. Then some of them wheeled cannon—I should think they were—and ran them on board. Every mortal of them toiled like a popular man at the cotillion, and

one big, stalwart giant carried two cases of arms or cartridges out of the swamp and on to that boat every trip. The others called him 'The Cid'; he had such a big, hulking, chivalric way with him.

"But though they worked mighty hard, they did not work quite fast enough.

"Suddenly a chap who was perched up on one of the little masts, looking over the surrounding landscape, exclaimed, 'Ahoy, there, on deck! There's a cutter coming down on us, about three miles off.'

"'Can you make her out?' screamed the skipper of the pirate craft, a bluff, cut-off, stalwart individual.

"'Yes, I think she's the *Boutwell*.' Then a moment after the sailor shouted, 'She is the *Boutwell*, sure!'

"'All aboard!' yelled the captain.

"Then how those beggars did work.

"'We've not got all the arms on board yet; there are two dozen cases of cartridges,' cried the leader of the pirates.

"'We'll take them next trip!' cries the captain. 'All aboard!'

"'I say!' yells the man at the masthead. 'She sees us. The *Boutwell* is headed for us!'

"'Pull in those gangplanks, and all hands aboard!' shouts the skipper from the pilot-house.

"Gracious! how the gangplanks came in! Goodness! how the desperadoes swarmed on board! They left one man, they were in such a hurry.

Oh, how I laughed when I saw it was the big beggar! He had two cases on his back. He tossed one of 'em on board as if it was feathers.

He was just slinging the other case when I heard the captain ring for steam, and the boat flew out as if she were blue varnish. She was fifty feet from him before he knew it.

“‘Take you next trip!’ called out the captain to him.

“Then the big fellow made a rather astounding remark. He said: ‘Hang it! I have paid for that expedition, and it has left me’; next shook his head kind o’ dubiously and muttered: ‘*Will I never get to work?*’

“But I did not pay much attention to him. I was looking at the tug. Good gracious! how she fled from that island! It was dead dark by this time, and though she carried no lights the revenue cutter apparently saw the steamer, for she did not pay any attention to us, though I waved my hands and shouted to her as she shot past after the desperadoes.

Then Rex and I got into our boat, which fortunately had not been scuttled, and came over here. But those fellows did scoot in a hurry. Rex says he thinks they must have left thirty or forty cases of stuff behind.”

“Thirty or forty cases of arms for *Cuba Libre!*” exclaims Varona; then goes on, military decision in his voice: “Those arms are the life-blood, perhaps, of my country. We must preserve them. You, Señor Balasco, as a patriot, must help me take charge of those arms.”

“What is the use?” says Estrabon, half carelessly, half sneeringly. “That big, hulking fellow that they called the ‘Cid’ is over there looking after them.”

"Goodness! He'll be on the island alone all night," ejaculates Gertie, nervously; "perhaps without provisions."

"Oh, the 'Cid' isn't one of the kind, I should imagine, who'd mind much being out all night by himself," laughs Vortex. Then he adds, "Besides, the chap came over with Rex and me."

"Where is he?" is a chorus from the ladies, who are rather prepared to make a hero of this big, hulking, two-case-carrying individual.

"Oh, he's in the dining-room with Rex, getting something to eat. He said he hadn't had a Delmonico meal for two weeks. Perhaps he didn't care about joining the ladies. Possibly he thought his clothes, big high boots, and gray shirt sort of thing, don't yer know, were not quite the attire, don't yer see, for this gay function. I'm hardly up to festival myself. I didn't like to keep you waiting for the news, so just ran over. I'll take a bite, slip into a dress suit, and be back in a moment. Can I have the cotillion with you, Miss Rivers? Thanks awfully. Does Jack Blakely lead? Ta, ta, for a minute," and the little man flies off, leaving them all discussing the affair.

CHAPTER XIII.

"MY BILLY."

BUT Mr. Vortex does not go alone; Gertie flits ahead of him.

Varona says to Balasco, "Come, *mi amigo!* Let us shake hands with a friend of Cuba."

"You must go over and greet him and make him comfortable," remarks Miss Vanstone, eagerly to her papa, then suggests, "Don Estrabon, if he is eligible, we will invite the 'Cid' on our picnic cruise with us!"

So most of the house party, taking hint from their host, stroll over to the great white mansion to greet the newcomer, though a great many of the guests for the evening from the neighboring keys, knowing Cuban sympathizers and embryo filibusters very well by sight, take much less interest in the hero, and, as the band is again playing merrily the strains of a *habanero*, go to dancing with as much vim as they had displayed before little Vortex came in to interrupt their festivity and tell them his story.

Through the shell paths of the garden, where Chinese lanterns suspended from tropical shrubs are blazing brightly, Balasco walks beside his fair young hostess chatting and happy. Has she not said to him, "*We* must take him on our cruise with *us*?" "*Diantre!*" laughs the Don in his mind. "It is always *us*, and always *we* now," and gazes with eyes of possession at the girl as she steps into the dining-room, her ball dress floating about her dainty steps.

At the dinner table are seated Rex and a great, big, easy-mannered giant of a fellow, habited in loose gray shirt, with belted trousers, that are tucked into high campaigning boots that come above his knees. The loose, open collar shows a brawny throat, just becoming bronzed by exposure to the sun and wind. Above this is an honest Saxon face, surmounted by brown curly hair, and

lighted by hazel eyes. Altogether, the gentleman, who is smoking, has rather a bored expression both as to face and attitude. But this leaves him as Miss Gertie exclaims, "Here's Indra!" and Rex ejaculates, "Governor, I have brought home Billy Severance."

"Yes, our Billy is now the 'Cid'!" cries Gertie excitedly clapping her hands.

"Yes, came over to dinner," remarks the gray-shirted Hercules. "You see our cook went away on the tugboat." As he says this he rises, and bowing easily, adds, "Good-evening, Miss Vanstone."

But the girl does not answer him. Estrabon, who stands beside her, thinks he hears a faint, quick gasp for breath, as the others of the party come into the room.

Little Miss Rivers cries: "Why, it's Mr. Severance!" then goes on, excitedly: "He must lead the german. He's a cotillion potentate."

"You will have to excuse me, I believe, this evening," answers the gentleman, smiling, as he inspects his costume, which needs mending and is covered with swamp mud and coral dust. "My trunks are at Jacksonville, and I am a little too much for Rex's extra dress suit, though he has kindly proffered it to me."

"Yes, by jove! Didn't I keep his name a secret beautifully?" chirrup little Vortex. "I tried to get him to come over so I could spring him on the ball in jack-boots and filibuster fixings; but he was too blooming hungry, don't yer see!"

Here Mr. Vanstone, with outstretched hand, breaks in, crying cordially: "My boy, I'm glad to see you!" then adds, excitedly:

"What the devil are you doing privateering and risking your neck like a—a——"

"Bayard," suggests Flora Woodbridge.

"Well, you see, I was told to go to work," remarks our Billy, quietly. "I was also informed that polo playing wasn't work, and driving four-in-hands was not the proper occupation of man. Politics is not in our set generally considered quite the proper thing. I was too old for West Point, so the American army wasn't open to me. For the same reason the navy was barred to me. I thought of helping the Armenians, but the newspapers said they had all been killed, so I decided to do a little labor for the same cause George Washington fought for about one hundred years ago. I have a general habit of taking the part of the under dog in the fight, you know, and had just a little spare cash at my banker's. So after a little consultation with some gentlemen in New York I came to Jacksonville, invested my spare change in the proper kind of goods, and was going on a trading expedition to Cuba."

While all this is being said, Don Estrabon, his glance perhaps drawn by some movement of the girl, some fluttering of her fair bosom, or perhaps a panting breath or two, that comes sighing from her coral lips, is looking at Indra Vanstone.

In her face he sees something he has never seen before—something that turns him deathly sick.

For it is not her action, it is her face that frightens him as she stands, one little foot advanced, one white arm extended in welcome, and a glance in her eyes that tells of joy returned and passion awakening.



Just at this moment, she comes to the table, looks the 'Cid' straight in the eye, then almost laughs in his face and murmurs: "You great, big, foolish fellow, butchering people and cutting throats is not the proper kind of work for you to do!" and her hand has a caress in it as she extends it to him.

"No?" replies Severance, gripping the delicate fingers as he half mutters these curious words: "Would you kindly next time be more explicit in your definition of the duty of man?"

"Did you hear that?" snickers Miss Woodbridge to Blakely. "It was Indra Vanstone that gave the 'Cid' his instructions."

"Yes. And she's taking them back again!" remarks Jack *sotto voce*. "By Jove! I'd travel as a filibuster myself for such a look."

But Indra cannot have the hero all to herself. The other young ladies crowd round him, and he is *fêted* and made much of by Ethel Rivers, Miss Woodbridge, and Amy Ormiston.

Mr. Severance has always been popular with the fair sex, having a hearty, manly, though sometimes insouciant way with him that ladies like, to which his present adventure has added, for women are great worshipers of gentlemen with strong hands, light hearts and brave spirits. He is also, curious to say, well liked by men, having a frank, up-and-down, outspoken manner with them, an open hand and a very full pocket.

The men also crowd about him and are very glad to see him. Jack Blakely, who is an intimate, slaps him on the back. Varona clasps his hands and mutters, "Some day we fight side by side!"

Even Estrabon is compelled, when presented by Miss Vanstone, to mutter: "'A friend of Cuba' is my friend!" But his eyes have grown haggard and his lip is twitching. He is dazed. He can't, he will not believe!—though the laughing whispers that come to him make him distracted.

"Just to think, Don Balasco," says Gertie, playfully, to him, "that foolish Rex told me Indra had put our Billy in the sweet by and by." And she claps her hands and chirrup merrily: "But Billy has come in out of the wet."

This is enforced by words he catches from the young lady and gentleman themselves.

The war talk of Varona is still ringing in Indra's ears. She whispers: "Papa, we must keep our Billy from going fighting again."

"You know there is only one way of doing that!" says the 'Cid' calmly, though his eyes give point to his speech.

Then the girl's eyes droop under the glance. She murmurs, picking a flower to pieces: "I must look after our ballroom guests and keep them dancing." But even as she steps out of the open window she turns love-lit eyes upon him, and says, waving adieu with her hand: "Back in a minute."

It is a glance that brings despair unto the Don, *for now he believes!*

He staggers out upon the veranda to get more anguish, for here Rex, in happy mood, taps him on the shoulder, and laughs:

"Did you see that? Romeo and Juliet again. They were spoons before. Indra made a blooming fool of herself, but now I think everything will be all right."

Everything all right means for Balasco everything all wrong. He wanders off amid the shaded alleys of the garden, strikes his palms together, and moans: "*Dios mio!* I am so helpless—*helpless!*"—and becoming pathetic in his unreasoning misery, mutters: "God pity poor Balasco, whose soft heart is weeping."

Then, by evil chance, he hears voices on the veranda just above him. They come from Flora Woodbridge and Amy Ormiston.

"And how about the other *one*, the unfortunate Don, now that Sir Lancelot has arrived?" laughs Flora.

"Oh! The romantic Spaniard did very well *pour passer le temps*. Miss Vanstone likes to be amused," murmurs the fair widow

With this, into Estrabon's Spanish soul comes that peculiar element of Latin passion which makes it often dangerous, sometimes fatal, to its object. Balasco mutters hoarsely to himself: "Revenge! Indra, I remember my oath. Thy beauty shall be for me and no other man!" and goes rambling about the paths of tropic evergreens, his brain half-dazed with this despair that has come upon him to turn this beautiful evening, that had seemed to him Heaven, into a Walpurgis-night peopled with the shades of Hades, Mephisto chatting with him.

In this business he receives but little attention. Everybody, save him, is having a very merry time of it. Music is coming up blithely from the ball-room. The guests have all gone back there and are dancing the *farandole*, for they are making a Cuban *fête* in honor of the erstwhile filibuster.

But though Severance strolls over, he does not

go into the ballroom, and sits on the little veranda looking in. To him the girls come running out during pauses of the german, and they all sing one song: "You won't let your costume bar you from supper?"

"No;" replies Sir Galahad, who finds the charms of Venus quite as pleasant as the delights of Mars; "I drop in with the champagne."

So the *fête* goes on very merrily, none of them seeming to miss Balasco very much, though Gertie once says: "Rex, where's Don Estrabon?"

And the boy replies: "Oh, he is down in the garden, there, basking in the moonshine. I asked him if there was anything the matter with him, and he said he had the neuralgia."

"Very well, if he doesn't get better, I have something that will give him ease," remarks Miss Gertie, who hasn't forgotten yet that she has been a Red Cross girl.

Then they all throng the bowling alley to add the joy of supper to the other joys of this hilarious evening.

Amid uproarious bravos, Ramon offers a toast to the new friend of Cuba, and it is quaffed in foaming goblets of champagne.

But even good things come to an end. The guests have all drifted out into the ballroom, and from thence gone their way; some to the house to sleep, others to take boat and return to their island homes.

The big tug has just gone snorting off to Key West with the last of them, but Billy Severance sits smoking on one of the little verandas of the

billiard room, and Indra Vanstone wanders to his side and murmurs, "Every one's gone!"

Flanked by shrubbery, and a big awning, the balcony has a good deal of privacy; though only sheltered on the front by a flowering oleander.

"I have been thinking, Miss Vanstone," says the young man, slowly puffing his cigar, "that my life is rather like one of those burnt-out Chinese lanterns you have got slung all about here; never very brilliant, and if it went out, hardly worth lighting again."

"You still have thoughts of going to Cuba?" asks Indra, in a frightened way.

"Why, yes, I don't see that there is anything else for me to do. I promised those fellows to go over. I suppose there is only one thing that could decently keep me away," remarks the young man.

"What—is—that?" The young lady droops her head and looks very bashful and very beautiful by the faint light of the expiring Chinese lantern that hangs above her.

"You!"

"Oh Billy!"

"Are you ever going to tell me to go to work again?"

"No, Billy!"

Then their eyes meet, and the man mutters: "Great Heavens! You are crying."

To this the girl falters: "My Billy! I've—I've been so unhappy!" but is no more, for the great arms she loves come round her, and she is gathered in—ball dress, cloud-effects, and all—unto the big breast she has longed for, and is there made as happy as a girl can be.

Now this is a horrible sight for Don Estrabon but the poor wretch chancing to wander this way in his round of agony, sees it, and with it come to him the passions of the damned.

He staggers away and gazing despairingly over the water, mutters, a little Spanish accent coming to him in his despair: "Mee Billee! *Mee Billee!* He likes to take the part of the under dorg in de fight. How about de upper dorg, eh?"

Then some deft hint from his satanic majesty coming into his facile brain, his eyes light up with an unholy joy, and he laughs smoothly, even melodiously, and his soft Southern voice murmurs: "Mee Billee wanted to go there! *Dios Mio!* He shall go there!"

Then Estrabon walks about consulting with Mephisto; finally his eyes chancing to light on the *Flying Fish*, and additional suggestion reaching him from below, Don Balasco utters these curious words slowly, a pause between each as if adding two and two and two: "The yacht—arms—Varona! That makes a filibuster!"

Next suddenly uttering a cry of despair he moans: "*Mi querida! Mi alma!* That will not give you back to me!" And the agony of love coming on him again, this picturesque Spaniard of varying moods weeps like a child whose toy is torn from him.

BOOK III.

THE PICNIC OF DON BALASCO.

CHAPTER XIV.

"THE FLAG DID NOT PROTECT."

BUT, overcoming his emotion, the Don mutters: "I must have sleep. I must be strong tomorrow. I must conquer myself if I would conquer them," and so turns from the garden, where he has been holding his communings with Asmodeus, passes up the broad steps and enters the open portals of the Vanstone mansion, which, though the night is very well advanced, are still open, for some of the guests and most of the servants have not yet gone to bed.

Politely refusing a suggestion from Blakely to sit down and have a cigar with him, Estrabon passes through the great hall and up the stairway, to be confronted by a ministering angel.

It is little Gertie, who says: "I heard about your neuralgia from Rex and have brought something to make you sleep," then adds: "You look as if you need it. Mercy! How you must have suffered!"

For the face that she is looking at, bears traces of mighty emotions. Balasco seems to have grown older. His eyes are haggard and have pathetic

suffering in them. His lips quiver slightly and his hands are nervous and trembling.

"I have brought you," continues the girl, "something that Dr. Granite left for Lieutenant Ramon, in case he grew nervous and excited. Fortunately, he is now becoming a strong man, so it is here intact."

She holds out to the Spaniard a little hypodermic syringe and a bottle labeled "Magendie's Solution of Morphine." "This is of a normal strength," she remarks, with the accuracy of a Red Cross girl. "Ten drops make a third of a grain; but in case that does not cause rest, repeat it in an hour."

"How long a sleep will it give me?" asks Estrabon hurriedly.

"Dr. Granite stated the smaller dose will probably produce six hours."

"Ah! six hours is what I want exactly. Six hours of forgetfulness. Then I am strong to do my work."

With this he goes promptly to his room, the young lady gazing after him, somewhat surprised by his manner and thinking, "Do his work? He hasn't got any!"

Then she imagines it must be Indra's picnic cruise to which he will devote his attention, or some labor to assist the patriot cause. "If he should dream of enticing Ramon to go to battle?" shudders the girl, then concludes: "Pshaw! Ramon won't be strong enough to fight for weeks, and weeks, and I'm very glad of it!" A curious expression for a nurse to make.

In his chamber, Balasco says, "Six hours! Yes,

"I need it," fills the little hypodermic syringe with ten drops, then suddenly pauses and murmurs, "By Jove! This is the card! That point will bother my mind no longer—the key to my plan!" He gazes curiously at the morphine solution and ejaculates, "Ah, darling little girl, to place it in my hands!" and kisses his hand toward that part of the mansion in which Miss Gertie is supposed to be, blessing her for a thing that would make the little girl's white shoulders shiver and her tender heart grow cold.

A moment after, jabbing the sharp needle into his arm, and injecting the fluid, this gentleman of plots and devices goes to bed, and, despite the mental tortures that are even now racking him, falls to sleep, with laughter on his lips, and murmuring: "*They* sleep to-morrow night. *Caramba!* the awakening!"

With six hours of refreshment in his body, Estrabon springs up to encounter a blazing hot day. There is little if any breeze, and the hot sun shows that it is the end of April and Emerald Key is on the border of the Torrid Zone.

It is almost ten o'clock.

He dresses hurriedly, vigorously, eagerly, and steps down to the breakfast-room, to find a good many of the gentlemen. Most of the ladies have not yet made their appearance, but Miss Vanstone is there, looking a little bashful, though wondrously beautiful, a new light of happiness gleaming in the girl's eyes; for is not her betrothed sitting beside her?

Severance is still in the gray shirt and high boots of the night before, but they have had a

good brushing. In addition he wears a light coat of Mr. Blakely's, though this is too small for him. He is laughing over his costume and saying, "Jack's the only man who came near me; his coat is a little tight, but as for shirts no one on Emerald Key can help me—with them."

"I am going to Key West to-day in my steam-launch, shall I telegraph for your trunks?" suggests Balasco.

"Yes, wire the St. James Hotel, Jacksonville," says Billy; adding, "I am awfully obliged to you."

"And so am I," utters Indra, "but then it is only one of the many favors Don Estrabon has done for me."

Her eyes are grateful, and she would put coals of fire on this gentleman's head were not this gentleman's head red hot with a Latin passion. Balasco's is not a love that will take refusal and go away, but that kind of an admiration which makes the man who possesses it a terror, a menace, to the woman he makes his idol.

"When does the picnic cruise begin, Indra?" asks Mr. Vanstone, breaking into the conversation from his end of the table.

"Not till to-morrow; we can't get away to-day. The ladies upstairs are too tired after last night's gayety—besides, Gertie has run out of long dresses." Here Miss Vanstone laughs slyly and looks at her sister, who hangs her head in a school-girl way, blushing delightfully.

"Run out of long dresses?" cries Rex. "Why she has only just run into them."

"But Annie, our dressmaker, is at work on some new ones," adds Indra.

"Well, you, yourself, will be wanting a lot of stuff soon, I presume," laughs Vanstone, then adds in a paternal, bless-you-my-boy sort of way: "Billy, why does Indra want to take us all up to New York next week?" emphasizing the last with a *pater familias* grin.

Then words come to Estrabon's ears that anger and irritate him, even as he gazes at his lost one, who looks very dainty and cool despite the heat this morning, and had not his nerves been strengthened by sleep and brought into very good control, the Spaniard might burst out upon them in some wild, passionate, crazy way.

For Rex is making jokes that drive him to distraction. He hears the youth in schoolboy heedlessness half whisper into his younger sister's ear: "I suppose things were settled last night on the veranda. Gertie, when is Billy to be slaughtered?"

This is received by a joyous giggle from Gertrude; and Balasco echoes, a jeering quiver in his soft Latin voice, though agitation destroys his accent: "When ees our Billee to be slaughtered? *Diantre!* That is a good idea, a novel idea, to be sure! When ees our Billee to be slaughtered?" An awful spasm of hilarious, though yellow laughter, overcomes him.

But Miss Vanstone is too happy to be disturbed by jokes this morning. She blushes brightly, then looks at the giant who is sitting beside her, and says: "Billy is not to be slaughtered at all. I am not going to let him go to the war."

"He is not going to Cuba to fight?" asks Varona from the other end of the table. Then he

says suddenly: "But those arms! There are thirty or forty cases of them over there, I understood from Mr. Vortex."

"Yes. Twenty cases of cartridges and perhaps twenty-five of arms and one rapid-fire gun," rejoins Severance, easily.

"Then they must not be lost to the cause!"

"Oh, they won't get injured. Night air won't do them any harm. I saw that they were well tarpaulined myself before I came over here. Still, I imagine we had better do something about them," remarks the American.

"Why not run over in the yacht and get them?" suggests Estrabon, eagerly.

"Yes, that's it! If we can get your consent, Mr. Vanstone?" remarks Ramon.

"Oh, do what you like about it," says the head of the family, carelessly. "Only don't get me into trouble with Uncle Sam."

"That shall be provided for," replies Estrabon, significantly. "Then the two other gentlemen arrange that they will take the yacht over in the early afternoon, and put the arms in her for safe keeping."

"We'll only leave them there for a day or two at the most, Mr. Vanstone. Then I will find some way of making the proper use of them," remarks Severance, with the decision of a man accustomed to do things in pretty much his own way.

To these plans Estrabon listens with gleaming eyes. The step proposed is one on the road he wishes these gentlemen to take.

Lighting his cigar, he strolls out, sits down on the shady side of the veranda to puff one of his

famous *Imperiales*, fan himself and think the thing quietly over.

Soon he hears a whistle, and, looking up, sees his steam-launch glide up to the landing, bringing his mail from Key West.

Very shortly his letters and newspapers are placed in his hands by the quartermaster of the boat.

"Any further orders?" asks the man.

"Yes; keep steam up. I must run back to Key West in person to-day."

The negro sailor goes away.

With a "Pish!" the Don, without reading his letters, which are all about the tobacco trade, puts them in his pocket.

On his lap is a newspaper, the *Equator-Democrat*. Headlines in big black type catch his eye. He picks it up, reads, and grows excited.

The *Competitor*, the vessel Mastic has been looking for, has been captured by a Spanish gunboat within three miles of the Cuban coast. She had arms on board; her passengers were mostly Cuban citizens of the United States, though some of them were of American birth; among them, one Ona Milton, a newspaper man, the editor of the Key West *Mosquito*. Though the schooner was flying the flag of the United States, and despite the fact that those on the vessel made no resistance whatsoever, her crew and passengers have been seized upon, shackled, and, though the Spaniards did not butcher them on the spot, which for a time was their intention, they have been taken to Havana, thrown into the Morro Castle as prisoners *incomunicado*, which means without right of inter-

course with any one, without benefit of legal counsel or even the privilege of communicating with the representative of the American government. They are to be tried by court-martial and will be doubtless shot that very day. At least, so the paper states, adding that Key West is in a ferment, so many friends of the captured live in that town.

It is very pleasant reading to Don Balasco; incidentally, because it shows that some of those probably trying to assist the Cuban cause have come to destruction, but chiefly because it makes the ingenious plot he has in his head as strong as the Rock of Gibraltar.

"She must know of this," he thinks, and very shortly he is in the dining-room, surrounded by bright and happy faces, and a great show of fashion, for most of the ladies have at length got down to breakfast, and the thermometer giving them chance for tropic effects are making an elaborate display of beautiful toilets of lightest lawns and gauzy muslins, as they chat enthusiastically about the coming yachting picnic Miss Indra has promised them. Amy Ormiston, who is in a spiritual costume by Duprez, remarking: "To-morrow we hunt sea-breezes."

"Don't forget, Don Balasco, you are to have full charge of the cruise!" says his young hostess, as she languidly fans herself, looking up at him pleasantly.

"I am always at your service, *Señorita Vanstone*," says the Don, a little gasp in his voice, a strange excitement in his demeanor and a wondrous light in his eyes, that roll themselves curiously, even as he speaks, toward Indra.

For as the girl utters the words, "*You have full charge of the cruise!*" into his facile mind has suddenly sprung the crowning glory of the plot he has been devising. A plan as ingenious in its bizarre and awful effects, as startling in its very devilishness, as ever Satan pictured since sin came to this earth—one which has many details, but at the end of it Estrabon Balasco sees Indra Vanstone in his arms, a bride—perchance unwilling, but still a bride. For, curiously enough, in all its passion, in all its sensuousness, the mind of the Spaniard has never pictured anything but the wedding ring in connection with this young lady, whose myriad graces, fascinating eyes, lovely disposition, exquisite features and glorious form, have led him to say to himself: "I, Estrabon Balasco, will win and wear her; her beauty shall all be for me and for no other man!"

As this flies through his mind, the joy of it is so tremendous he dare not remain in her presence; he will not be able to control himself. So, casting one sneaking glance at "Our Billy," who is seated chatting merrily with Amy Ormiston, and mentally laughing, "I wonder what he would say or do if he knew—if he knew!" the Don walks out on the piazza and goes to smoking—happy as the fiend who first invented American diplomacy.

Even as he lights his cigar, Miss Vanstone comes out to him. She says playfully: "You seem to desert me this morning, *Señor* Balasco." Then—perchance because this girl has guessed something—she murmurs: "I have a little secret for you; something very pleasant has happened to me. A change has come into my life. A week

from now we shall leave here. Within a month Mr. Severance and I are to be married. We hope you will run up to New York for the ceremony."

There is a kind of apology in the girl's method of delivering this. Perhaps Indra now feels that she has been kinder to Don Estrabon than perchance she ought.

But he looks up at her and says: "I shall be present at your wedding, never fear," then laughs pleasantly.

"I'm delighted to hear that," replies Miss Vanstone. "I have another favor to ask: Take our little picnic cruise off my hands entirely. I——"

"Ah! That is because you have now something better to occupy yourself with."

"Perhaps!" the girl smiles archly.

"Mr. Severance will be occupied also, probably," laughs the Don. Then he goes on eagerly: "Take everything from your mind. I, Don Balasco, will relieve you!"

"Very well, then. The whole affair is in your hands—even to liquors and cocktails," laughs the young lady.

"Ah! cocktails! There I am an expert," chuckles Balasco.

And the elder Vanstone, chancing to look out of one of the windows, indorses him by saying: "On the cruise don't let any other living man make your cocktails. I have drunk some of the Don's in Key West."

Glancing at the paper he still has in his hand, Balasco suddenly thinks: "Pest! I forgot. The

glory of my last conception knocked this *Competitor* news out of my head ! ”

Then he murmurs significantly: “She should know what it will mean to her;” and Miss Indra having returned to the breakfast-room, he follows her to give out his news of the capture of American citizens and their almost certain butchery but a short hundred miles away from this scene of easy gayety and modern fashion.

Though the faces of the men become very sober as they hear of the affair, and the ladies—God bless them!—give out full measure of sympathy unto the unfortunates of whom Balasco reads, the effect is greatest upon Varona.

“If they shot them down after drumhead it would mean war between America and Spain, and the freedom of your island !” says Blakely, slapping Ramon upon the back.

“Pooh !” answers the elder Vanstone. “They are not going to kill any of them. Our State Department must act. Under treaty they are bound to give every man of them trial by civil court.”

“Then,” remarks the Cuban, solemnly, “mark my word, the next vessel caught with the American flag flying and arms on board by a Spanish warship will never be heard of. The crew will be butchered, the vessel sunk. They will have no chance to appeal to the American government.”

“I believe you are right—I know you are right, Varona, my friend !” cries Don Estrabon, his eyes lighting up with an unholy look—some think of anguish, others of patriotism ; but he knows what it means—for all the time in his mind is running

these curious words: "The flag did not protect—the flag did not protect!"

"*Dios!*" murmurs the lieutenant. "More good men dead for our unhappy island," and mutters maledictions on the Spanish.

"That poor Milton, the newspaper-man. Why, he was up at St. Augustine doing society articles for his paper two weeks ago," says Amy Ormiston. Then suddenly screams, "Good gracious! They are not going to kill him!"

From this interview of frowning men and excited sympathetic women the Don goes out very cheerfully and is soon at the landing-stage, where his steam-launch is ready to take him to Key West. He gives some hasty orders to his steersman and the boat glides out to the *Flying Fish*, upon the deck of which Balasco soon stands in consultation with the yacht's skipper.

"I'm all right as regards provisions and liquors now," remarks Thomas. "I wish I was as well off about the crew. The chief engineer I had to put ashore, sick with some fever, at Miami. If I had kept him aboard some of the women would have died of fright and thought it was the black vomit. The mate got drunk last night and I've fired him by schooner. I have only got two deckhands and two coal passers, one engineer and myself, along with cook and steward—altogether too few to run this craft, if we've much steaming to do or many passengers to take care of."

"I think I can help you on a pinch," replies Balasco, very happy at the information. "The engineer of my steam-launch, though he is a

negro, is a very good mechanic. He can take watch and watch with your engineer. My helmsman can take a trick at the wheel, and I have two deck-hands on my steam-launch that are at your service also."

"You've got a pretty good crew for a boat of that size," laughs the captain.

"Well, she is forty-odd feet long," returns Balasco. "Do you want my men?" His heart is sinking within him. He fears the black skin of his engineer may prove an almost fatal obstacle at this point.

"Yes; bring them aboard to-night. They will do very well for a day or two," says Thomas, easily. Then he adds: "My bunkers are full: I could steam from here to Bermuda without running to a dock."

"Good coal?" queries Estrabon.

"The very best. Mr. Vanstone likes to travel quickly, and you can't make speed without you've the proper fuel."

"Very well. I will be back with you at six o'clock." And after a few more minor details the Spaniard goes down the vessel's side, boards his own craft, and steam being put upon the *Figaro* she glides away, saluting with her whistle some ladies and gentlemen in Mr. Vanstone's garden, a courtesy which is answered by waving handkerchiefs from the ladies and shouts of "*Bon voyage* and quick return!" from the men.

And as the boat drives over the waves for Key West, its owner is singing one happy song: "The flag did not protect!—THE FLAG DID NOT PROTECT!"

CHAPTER XV.

"IN SEARCH OF A SEA BREEZE."

It is now eleven o'clock in the morning.

The launch, driven at high speed, reaches the island-town in about two hours and a half.

At the wharf at Key West Don Balasco orders his crew to keep steam up and wait for him—he is in a hurry about this business.

He walks up to his cigar manufactory, and after carelessly chatting a few minutes with one of his partners on the business of the house, steps up to the big room where the cigars are in process of manufacture.

Though work is going on at the moment, he finds his hands, who are all Cubans and patriots, very much excited at the news that is being read to them by their reader, whose business it is to interpret and translate the morning papers.

This gentleman has now an extra in his hand, which produces great excitement. He says hastily to the Don, as he enters: "They are not shot yet!"

"Thank God for that!" cries Balasco; though he does not. For he would very much like to have been able to bring over the news to Miss Indra Vanstone that every one of the *Competitor's* crew had been done to death in Cabañas fortress.

As Estrabon walks through the room, apparently making a general business inspection, he passes the two men that Mastic had noticed on his journey from Tampa. To them he whispers: "Meet me at my house as soon as possible."

This is responded to by the big-eared Juan and the small-eared Pablo with significant glances.

A moment after the Don leaves the room, but in his office he calls to one of the clerks: "Get me a box of your strongest and blackest *Invincibles*."

With this in his hand, and telling his partner he shall be away on a yachting cruise for a few days, Estrabon steps to his cottage.

Here he finds the two men already awaiting him. Taking them into his dining-room he locks all doors, and makes hasty inspection to see that no one can possibly hear. Then to the two, he, in low whispers, delivers such a proposition that they are frightened, throw up their hands and say they dare not—*not for their lives!*

To this he answers: "What! When you are under the protection of Weyler? I have in my hands papers from him and from the Spanish Government that would make me, and those whom I designate, as safe as the Captain-General himself wherever the flag of Spain flies. Besides, there is a thousand dollars for you."

But the men still hesitate, and Estrabon repeats what he has said, and makes his offer two thousand dollars in gold—a thousand dollars for each.

This the two, after consultation, agree to accept, though they do it even now in a frightened and reluctant manner—muttering they love their lives.

"Don't I love mine?" he laughs. "Would I go if I had not the hand of the Captain-General?" then adds: "Report immediately at the steam-launch, where you will act as deck-hands. Your duties will be the same on the *Flying Fish*. Nothing more."

"What! Is that *all*?" asks Pablo, astonished.

"Everything—save this! As you value my favor you are to smoke no cigars while on the yacht."

"No cigars?" queries Juan. "*Diablo!* No cigars."

"But all the *cigarettes* you please," answers Estrabon. "Now mark me, not a cigar, as you love your lives!"

And the two leave him, Pablo whispering to his companion: "*Santos!* This is a strange affair!"

Next the Don steps hurriedly out to a neighboring apothecary's and makes a purchase of opium, incidentally asking the clerk in charge, who knows him very well, some pertinent questions about Magendie's Solution of Morphine.

A moment later he is at the telegraph office, and wires by direct cable in cipher to Havana a long, curious, yet important dispatch.

From there he returns to his house, opens his box of strongly flavored *Invincibles*, and also another of his delicious *Imperiales*, then laughs playfully: "I wonder if I have forgotten my art as a boy when I was a *Concha* maker!" and goes to work upon these two boxes of cigars in a very curious manner.

His hands are deft, and he accomplishes this business quite rapidly, neither of the boxes containing over twenty-five of the weeds; but in doing them up in a special package he taps one and says, laughingly: "These *Imperiales* for the swells; these *Invincibles*—aha!—for the crew, who like to smoke."

Ten minutes after this he is at his steam-launch.

where Juan, with the big ear, and his comrade await him.

Just as the boat is shoving off, a clerk comes running down from his office with a cable from Havana acknowledging the receipt of his message to that place.

Looking this over, the Don smiles placidly.

As the boat gets under headway for Emerald Key, he sits under the awning, making a hasty meal that he has had sent from a restaurant, his time having been too precious to waste in eating and drinking.

As he lunches he meditates.

One by one he adds incident to incident that will make his plan perfect, and murmurs: "A parallel case, a complete *parallel* case!" Next he glances over the crew. The engineer and the helmsman are Spanish negroes, who have been in his service for a long time and are devoted to him, as he has been a liberal master. To them he has already spoken. "These men will do as I tell them," he reflects; "the other two know what their duties are and what they will get for doing them."

'Tis now nearly six o'clock. The day is still blazing hot, which is not unusual in these latitudes in the beginning of summer, for it is now nearly the first of May. Though the sun is getting rather low in the horizon, it is very sultry, and no land-breeze has yet sprung up.

Proof of this is easily apparent. As the launch darts up to the landing at Emerald Key, Balasco can see the ladies on the veranda of Mr. Vanstone's villa are all using their fans vigorously, though their dresses are light as gossamer.

He gazes about ; what is happening on the water makes him very happy.

The *Flying Fish*, apparently returning from Coral Key, is about to anchor. On her deck he observes Varona and Severance lounging about under the awning, and Jack Blakely seated on a steamer chair, smoking lazily and fanning himself languidly. Estrabon gives command to his helmsman. The course of the *Figaro* is changed, and the boat runs up to the yacht just as she drops anchor.

"You have got them all right?" Balasco calls eagerly.

"Yes. The arms, cartridges and rapid-fire gun are in the hold all right enough!" replies Severance.

"All but the dynamite!" shouts Captain Thomas, "I refused to take that on board."

"Then don't come on shore!" cries Estrabon earnestly.

"Why not?"

"I have a surprise for you," he answers. "I will give you a dinner on the yacht. Bring out some of the ladies and we will go in search of a sea-breeze. There is one outside in the Gulf Stream certainly."

"It does look as if it is going to be a thundering hot night," replies Billy, languidly.

To this Varona adds, "There will be no land breeze to-day."

"Great Scott, you don't mean that! What makes you think so?" asks Blakely in languid dismay.

"I have lived in the West Indies too long not to

know the signs of a *tiempo caluroso*," answers the young Cuban. "It will be the first of the season, but it is going to be a sweltering evening."

"That doesn't frighten me much," answers Billy; "the Vanstones and I are going north soon." Then he adds contemplatively, "But to-night we might just as well make ourselves comfortable." A moment after he addresses Balasco, whose launch is now at the yacht's side-ladder, and says: "Hold up a minute! That's a good idea of yours, Don Estrabon, I'll just step into the *Figaro* and run ashore with you, and we'll bring those of the ladies who will come with us on board."

"Yes, a dinner on the yacht, a breezy sail in the moonlight," replies Estrabon, eagerly. "Just tell the cook I want to see him," he calls to Thomas, a strange joy lighting his face, for this hot evening has enabled him to very plausibly get over an exceedingly difficult step in the affair.

To the Captain's command, "Ahoy there, cook! Send frenchy aft!" that functionary makes his appearance from the galley, and to him Don Estrabon gives orders; suggesting the courses of a most fascinating meal.

While this is going on Severance has come down the ladder and stepped into the launch, which now leaves the side of the yacht and darts toward the landing place.

In the short minute it takes to get there Billy and Balasco have arranged the affair.

"You get what ladies you can, but I wouldn't make them too numerous, and we will quietly run off by ourselves for the evening," suggests Estrabon.

"That's my idea exactly," remarks Severance, who only wants one lady if he can make that arrangement, for he is very popular with the others, and they are apt to encroach upon his time that he now thinks should be devoted to Miss Indra Vanstone.

"Then all goes merrily," ejaculates the Don, as they make the landing stage.

But even as they do so, a rowboat ties up to it also, and Balasco gives a start of dismay, for out of it steps Mastic, the government detective.

The arrival of this man will destroy every chance the Spaniard has of success; he will seize the arms, and then—goodbye forever to Balasco's opportunity.

The Don says, hurriedly, to Severance: "Please step up to the house and make arrangements. That man apparently wants to see me," for Mastic has already hailed him.

A moment later he confronts the Revenue officer, whose words now bring dismay to the Spanish gentleman.

"How are you, Estrabon?" says the detective easily, for he is never very ceremonious with his Spanish *confrère*. Then he goes on in words that bring despair: "I got your note last night, but there has been no breeze all day, only a blazing hot sun, and Alligator Pete and I have been twelve hours beating up to Emerald Key upon the *Gopher*. But I guess I'm in time. I got hail from a sail-boat we met off Sugar Loaf Key that there were contraband arms on that island off there." He points to Coral Key.

"Yes," replies the other, eagerly, "about a hun-

dred filibusters and a quantity of arms, ammunition and dynamite.

"Great gosh! This will be the making of me!"

"But you're a little late," continues Balasco. "They all jumped on the *Three Friends* last evening in a great hurry, and left for Cuba followed by the *Boutwell*, which is apparently on the filibusters' track."

"Great Scott! have I missed them again?" and there is a muttered imprecation from the detective.

"A word in your ear," remarks the Don, who has steadied himself now, and is thinking rapidly, "The Cuban desperadoes didn't take away *all* the arms, the *Boutwell* was too quick for that. They left about thirty or forty cases of ammunition, etc., behind them on Coral Key."

"Which the *Boutwell* gobbled, I reckon," grumbles Mastic.

"No, they are there still, I believe," murmurs Balasco, blessing himself for the ready lie. For did Mastic know the arms were on the *Flying Fish*, he would surely seize them, and that would be an end to all hope of successful machinations.

"Then I'll have 'em to-night! Alligator Pete and I will sail over there at once."

"Do you think you will get there with this breeze?"

"Well, I'll try it."

"Of course, that is your duty!" says the Don, sternly. "Let me know when you succeed. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes," laughs Mastic; "good cigars go mighty fast. Alligator Pete and I finished the last of that

kill-care box you gave me just as we let go anchor. You don't happen to have any of them about you?"

"One or two," says Balasco, shortly, and he produces a few of his wondrous *Regalias Imperiales*.

"Now we are comfortable, I'll get to business," remarks the detective, as he lights up and goes back to his boat, which is rowed by Alligator Pete's boy, the Varmint.

Gazing after the revenue man, Estrabon suddenly shudders, muttering: "It was such a close call. If he guessed where those arms are it might destroy hope. He'll be all night drifting over to Coral Key—there is no breeze—and tomorrow!"

A great hope lights up his mobile features as he turns toward the house.

Here he finds Severance, who says to him, a tone of relief in his voice: "I could only get two ladies."

"Who?" This is very eagerly.

"Miss Vanstone and the widow. *La petite* Rivers and Miss Woodbridge are out with little Vortex and old Mr. Vanstone among his pine-apples and bananas. I shouldn't wonder if one of them would like to become my mother-in-law," adds the gentleman, laughingly.

"And Miss Gertie?" suggests Estrabon.

"Miss Gertie is engaged with Annie, our dress-maker," cries Rex, who comes into the hall at this moment. "If Miss Gertie goes out to sail to-night she will have to wear short skirts again for the picnic cruise."

"Rex," cries his juvenile sister, sternly, looking

over the banisters, "remember, please, that I am a young lady!"

The suggestion is made with a haughty dignity, at which Severance laughs merrily.

"You will go with us, Rex, I presume?" remarks the Don.

"Oh yes, I'm with you! Anything for a good dinner and a cold breath this hot day."

"Then the party is arranged," murmurs Balasco, for this is just the party he wants.

But Miss Gertie comes running down the stairs crying: "Is Lieutenant Varona going with you?"

"I think so," replies Severance, who is now taken charge of by his sweetheart, Indra having come down the stairs in the wake of her sister, looking very pretty in the lightest of muslins and the breeziest of sashes. At the sight of this young lady, Balasco's eyes flash; into his mind flies the ecstatic thought: "It is her bridal dress!"

Mrs. Ormiston, looking exquisite in a very fashionably made yachting suit of lightest fabric, with a jaunty little sailor hat on her head, now joins the party, and she and Miss Vanstone walk out upon the porch with Mr. Severance and Rex.

The Don would follow them. Suddenly he gives a start, mutters "Excuse me!" and runs upstairs.

In his chamber he hastily takes from his bureau the bottle marked "Magendie's Solution of Morphine" and the hypodermic syringe, laughing: "How near I was forgetting!"

Then he hastily descends to the main floor and is on his way out, when a little pleading hand is placed upon his arm, and Gertie's soft voice

whispers: "Don't you think you could spare Lieutenant Ramon? You'll have too many gentlemen for the number of ladies on the *Flying Fish*. Tell him I asked him to dine."

"I—I will give him your message," returns Estrabon, a slight hesitation in his voice.

"That will be lovely," says the young girl. "Mr. Vortex, papa and Ramon, and Miss Rivers, Flora, and I, will have as pleasant a dinner party as you on the yacht."

"May you have a delightful evening!" As he says this, the Don bows gallantly, and passes out to the others, where Miss Vanstone has been explaining to Severance and the widow that "Gertie's dressmaking is a very serious affair. I gave her all the dresses I could spare," remarks the young lady, "and she has run through toilet after toilet with the prodigality of——"

"Of a girl in her first long dresses," laughs Mrs. Ormiston.

"Yes, if I lent her any more I should have to go into Gertie's short skirts myself," returns Miss Vanstone, with a pretty blush.

At this moment Rex comes eagerly out of the hall, crying: "Heave ahead, my hearties!" and the party gets under way; Balasco following them through the shell-walks of the garden, counting them and numbering them and saying, "I have now every one I want."

Five minutes after they are transferred from Estrabon's steam-launch to the *Flying Fish*; the ladies fanning themselves languidly, and very happy to get under the ample awnings that shade its white deck; Severance, in his easy way, assisting them

up the side-ladder; Rex calling out gayly in nautical phrase: "Heave ahead there, *Flying Fishes!*"

Altogether they are as happy a party as ever boarded a yacht as they are received on board by Blakely and the young Cuban; and that is saying a good deal, for what is merrier than a cruise when the ladies are pretty, agreeable, and not sea-sick; and the gentlemen are gallant and devoted, and there is plenty of wine, liquors, and cigars aboard?

But Estrabon is the happiest of them all. His dark eyes gleam with almost a supernatural light. His laugh is soft, musical, rounded. "Why should I not be merry," he thinks; "am I not going on my bridal tour?"

Curiously enough, he does not give to Varona the message Miss Gertie has intrusted to him, but walks hastily to the pilot-house, where bluff Thomas is standing at the wheel, and says, an un-called-for thrill of excitement in his voice, "Do you want the extra hands, Captain?"

"Guess I might as well take 'em, as we are going outside," replies the sea dog.

"As you please," answers Estrabon. "I will moor the launch at your buoy."

This he does, directing his men to come on board, and ordering Juan of the big ear, and Pablo of the little ear forward among the deck hands, telling the Captain, his steersman of the *Figaro* will take a trick at the wheel whenever he wants him, and his engineer will take post in the engine-room under the orders of the engineer of the *Flying Fish*.

"I'll let your man take a trick at the wheel

while I look at him, and if he's satisfactory it'll take some trouble off my hands. My engineer can explain our machines to your man and report on his efficiency," answers Thomas, shoving up one of the windows of the pilot-house, which is in immediate communication with the engine-room of the yacht, it being placed pretty well forward to give greater cabin accommodation in the stern.

From his post of vantage the Captain can look right down into it, and he speaks to the engineer, calling out: "Sandy, tell me how the new man gets along, will yer?"

"Send him doon, Skipper; I'll verra soon tek cognizance of the loon," replies a bright Scottish voice through the open window, and Thomas sounding the bell, for by this time the anchor has been raised, the *Flying Fish* leaves her moorings to go in search of a sea-breeze in the open waters of the Gulf Stream.

All this has been watched by a disconsolate young lady armed with a field glass, from the upper windows of the Vanstone home. Miss Gertie is looking for the coming of young Varona, who comes not.

"Mercy! they are not sending anybody ashore," murmurs the girl in disappointment. "Oh goodness! they are hoisting the anchor!" Snatching up a straw hat the young lady runs down stairs; though the dressmaker calls to her saying: "I am ready to fit you now, Miss."

To this she shouts: "Back in a minute!" and runs hurriedly through the garden to the wharf to see the *Flying Fish* half a mile away and just passing out of sight behind a low green island.

"Why didn't he come on shore when I asked him to?" she ejaculates. Then suddenly flashes through the girl an awful thought. "Ramon has those arms with him, perhaps he will go away with them to death in Cuba;" and feminine logic coming into her still childish mind, she grows excited and frightened over the matter, and thinks: "That awful Balasco! He is such a Cuban patriot, he excites Ramon with the thought of his duty! Ramon said those arms might be the life blood of the Cuban cause. He will get off at some place with them. He didn't have the courage to say good-bye to me—that would have broken both our hearts. His duty called him." Then she almost faints as she thinks of the *Competitor* and murmurs with white lips: "The Spaniards murder all their prisoners."

But here a ray of hope flits to her.

She hears a voice at the landing-stage, saying: "All right, Varmint, if you've got that garden-truck safe on the boat we'll go back to the *Gopher*."

It is the voice of Mastic, the revenue officer, the good detective, the man who has promised to help keep Ramon out of harm and danger.

She runs to the edge of the wharf and cries, hurriedly, "Mr. Mastic! Mr. Mastic! Come up here, I want to speak to you, quick! You remember me, Miss Gertie Vanstone, who talked to you at lunch the other day?"

"Yes, I remember you very well," replies the government man. "Be with you in a second." Then he says, "Varmint, don't you get out of that boat. Keep round here!" and steps hastily on the landing-stage, runs up the stairs, and still puff-

ing one of Estrabon's cigars, remarks, "Miss Gertie, I am at your service; what can I do for you?"

And Gertie tells him her tale and her fears; at which the detective laughs grimly, and says: "No danger of that; the arms are over on that key yonder, where I am going to seize 'em as soon as we can get over."

"On—on Coral Key?" stammers the young lady.

"Certainly! I had it from Don Estrabon not twenty minutes ago."

"Then Don Estrabon does not tell you the truth!" whispers the young lady in a horrified voice. "Those arms are on board that yacht."

"WHAT!" This is a snort from Mastic.

"Yes; Don Estrabon knew all about it; he advised it; he was talking with Ramon and our Billy about it this morning. They went over there this afternoon and got them. I could see them carrying them on board with my telescope. You saw the *Flying Fish* just anchor when she came back, didn't you?"

"Gol darn it! Are you sure you are right?"

"Oh, I am certain. What did they go over there for?"

"Great snakes!"

"You must help me prevent Ramon going to Cuba. What was the good of my nursing him to life? what right has he to go to be killed there after I have saved it?" murmurs Gertie, wringing her hands.

"I wish I had known this about ten minutes ago," says the detective, glumly, gazing at the smoke of

the disappearing yacht. Then he rubs his shock head and mutters: "I can't understand it, the Don is not a——" He checks himself here, fearing to betray a state secret, and goes on rapidly to the young lady: "I don't think there is anything of that kind you fear in the wind, Miss. I don't see how your young Cuban can have any such wild idea in his head when you say the *Flying Fish* has got your sister and Mrs. Ormiston on board, besides Mr. Blakely, Mr. Severance, and your brother."

"Perhaps, Don Estrabon and Señor Varona are not going to do anything to-night. But I am afraid Ramon will put those arms on shore at Key West. Then duty will call him and he will go back and take them, and go to fight with the Cuban sympathizers, who are so noble and good, and break my heart," moans the girl, wringing her hands.

"Going over to Key West to put the arms on shore, are they?" snorts the revenue man. "Well, I think I can put a stop on that! I'll teach 'em to try and do me—telling me the arms were on that island!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Watch Mastic!" replies the detective, savagely. "Don't have no more thoughts of your young man getting into danger; those arms will be under my nose in two or three hours."

Then he eyes the smoke of the yacht, which has already got into the Gulf Stream, and says: "She is turning to the westward; she is bound toward Key West; now see what I'll do!"

He runs down to the boat, jumps in, and asks: "Varmint, can you steer?"

"What's been whaled into me for the last three years," cries the Varmint, "but nor' nor'west and sou'-sou'west and two p'int's on the port bow? Can I steer? I could steer a crocodile!"

"Can you steer a steam-launch?"

"I've did it a dozen times!"

"Well, I think I can contrive to run the engines at a pinch," mutters Mastic; then cries: "Pull for Balasco's boat!"

And taking an oar himself, two minutes after jumping into the little skiff he and the boy are aboard the steam-launch of the Spaniard, their little boat hitched behind it, and the detective is making preparations to get up steam, which is not difficult, as the *Figaro's* fires have been hastily banked, and there is enough vapor in her boiler to get the craft under headway at once.

As they pass the end of the wharf the officer cries to Gertie: "Don't you have any fear, little missey!"

And from the top of that structure comes back to him: "I am not a little missey. But I have every confidence in you!"

Then poised eagerly, like a bird on the top of a pile, she watches the steam-launch now slowly moving away.

Every minute the revolution of the *Figaro's* propeller becomes faster; the boat darts more rapidly through the water. She is taking the same course as the *Flying Fish*. A few minutes after, she disappears round the same island, making for the open Gulf Stream.

Then Miss Gertie turns slowly and goes up to the house, has her dresses fitted on in a half-

hearted, tearful way, and wanders down to the dinner-table to tell her father and his guests her extraordinary alarms and suspicions, and to be generally scoffed at; Miss Rivers, remarking: "Nonsense, my dear child, this *Competitor* business has made you nervous;" and Flora Woodbridge asserting, confidently, "Pooh! Jack Blakely is no fool."

Here her father comes down on the poor little girl, scoffing, "Stuff, rot, rabid nonsense! Isn't Severance on board with my daughter? Don't you suppose he will take care of her? This Cuban affair and this Red Cross business have made you as romantically silly as if you were a Dulcinea del Toboso." Then he utters these terrible words: "But Miss Tricks' boarding-school will take this nonsense out of you! Next week you go back there, *short dresses* and all."

This horrible threat produces a paralysis of the tongue and a crushed, appealing look on the part of Miss First Love during the evening. Even little Vortex's wit and humor cannot bring a laugh to her pretty lips.

She sobs herself to sleep; awakes the next morning, and looks out of her window on the water. Then her face grows very pale as she screams, "Oh, merciful Heavens! The *Flying Fish* is not there!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DINNER ON THE YACHT.

THE steam-launch, steered by the Varmint, is out on the Straits of Florida. The yacht, five

or six miles away, is leisurely steaming to the westward. But even now she is speeding at a good ten miles an hour and cannot be overtaken by the launch.

Looking at her, Mastic thinks grimly: "By her actions, she's going to Key West. If she does, I'll overhaul her there. Any way, she has got to come back to Emerald Key, and to-night those arms are under my nose." Then he goes on grimly: "The Don done me up, if what young Miss Gertie says is true, and if red eyes prove anything, that little girl evidently believes in her yarn. And yet, what reason?" Then he scratches his ear, and thinks, "Darn me if I understand it! There is no doubt Estrabon is an agent of Spain; why the devil doesn't he want me to seize those arms?" The more he thinks of it the less he understands it, and the more enraged he gets at his Spanish *confrère*.

Then, a very cunning idea coming into his head, he cogitates, "Darn me, I'll play him, too! I'll pretend I think he doesn't know the arms are on board. I'll startle him with my information, and see how Estrabon acts."

Therefore, keeping in the wake of the *Flying Fish*, the launch steams to the westward; though it is now so dark that were it not for the yacht's lights, Mastic would not be able to distinguish her.

That pleasure vessel continues merrily upon her cruise after ocean zephyrs. These, the gay party on her deck discover, balmy, but cool and refreshing, as soon as they get out of the lea of the Keys.

"A perfect evening !" remarks Amy Ormiston to Jack Blakely.

"Yes ; but I don't much envy those who stayed behind. They'll have rather a hottish time of it, though it is just cool enough here to bring appetite. And lifting up his voice, he cries: "Estrabon, you are the chief cook of this affair. Is not dinner in sight?"

"All in good time, my impatient friend," replies the Don. "Then we'll have a delicious banquet and afterwards I am going to mix you some of my famous champagne cocktails."

"Oh, yes! You should have heard Señor Vanstone singing their praises!" adds Ramon. "You, Don Balasco, made one for him at Key West, and he has not forgotten its flavor. I also remember them three years ago."

Here Severance, who has been seated on the other side of the deck chatting with his sweetheart, suddenly cries: "Who said cocktails?" "Bring them along now, while we're waiting for the cook!"

"I would like to accommodate you," laughs Estrabon, "but I cannot degrade my cocktails into appetizers. Besides, I think you are too hungry without them."

"Perhaps you're right," assents Billy.

Here Rex, who has been chatting to the Captain in the pilot-house, comes stamping with laughter to the party aft.

"What are you enjoying?" says Amy Ormiston, beckoning the youth to her side.

"Well," replies the boy, "one of the deckhands has got the most thundering big ear I ever saw.

He ought to quit the sea for dime museums." And he goes into a picturesque description of the wonderful auricular appendage of Juan, with gesticular embellishments that set everybody laughing.

But Balasco pays little attention to this. He and Varona are now grouped about Miss Vanstone. Ramon has given the Don an opening he has been longing for. He has said: "You were in Key West to-day. Any further news about the *Competitor*?"

"A little," replies Estrabon, shortly. "I brought an extra in my pocket which may interest you." He produces a copy of the *Equator-Democrat*, one of whose columns is headed with very black type, and states that the said schooner was taken on the high seas, as on the morning before the day of the reported capture she was seen near Sand Key Light.

Pointing straight over the bow of the boat, Balasco remarks: "Sand Key Light is there! In half an hour we shall see it. But the *Competitor* and those on board of her—where are they? Ask the vultures and the ravens of Cabañas." Then, as if to flavor this, he reads a little gruesome item which states that a passenger who arrived this day on the *Mascotte* reports that he saw about twenty men, one woman, and a child being landed on the dock at Havana, all in chains.

As Estrabon mentions the manacled woman, his eyes seem to rest on Indra. "You have not forgotten," he adds, "what Varona said to-day about the next vessel flying the American flag captured under similar circumstances." Apparently getting

excited over his subject, he now goes on to show what will surely happen to the next boat laden with arms that the Spanish capture on the Cuban coast under similar circumstances; that despite the American flag—yea, even perhaps *because* of that flag—they will be butchered to a man, their ship destroyed, and no officer of Spain will know anything about it—it will be——”

“The act of a murdering, cruel, barbarous despotism!” exclaims Rex in that love of freedom most American boys have, despite American statesmen.

But unheeding him, save by a look that hints that some day Rex may have a practical understanding of Spanish mercy, Balasco runs on in this strain so long and so vividly, that finally Amy Ormiston gives a little frightened shriek, puts her pretty hands to her ears, and cries: “Good gracious! do you want to spoil my dinner?”

Miss Indra, however, receives this blood and thunder oration in a different way. Putting a little hand upon the Don’s coat sleeve, she whispers: “Stroll with me forward. I have a request to make of you.”

As his arm thrills under the touch of the young lady’s fingers, Estrabon’s thought is: “This is my bride—the bride of to-morrow. *La Páloma* does not know it; but to-morrow evening she rests in my arms.”

Consequently his mind is not very intent upon the young lady’s confidences, which are to this effect: “Please do not speak of this affair to Gertie as you have done to me, when we return to Emerald Key. The child is now too anxious.”

"Anxious for—for whom?" he stammers, then laughs and says: "Oh I understand. For our young Cuban patriot," nodding his head vivaciously over his shoulder toward the stern where Lieutenant Ramon is now chatting with the widow, adding, "I will be very careful——"

Here Mr. Severance interrupts everybody by calling vigorously: "The steward announces dinner!"

A moment later they all walk into the saloon, which is a pretty little apartment and occupies the whole of the deck-house, being some twenty feet in length by fourteen or fifteen wide. In it the seven ladies and gentlemen sit down to a very merry and elaborate meal, which has been planned and designed by the Don and the French cook. As they are doing this Estrabon begs them to excuse him a moment and steps into the pilot-house.

"How do you find my negro steersman?" he says to the Captain.

"First rate! Could take a trick at the wheel on a man of war," replies Thomas. "My engineer, Sandy, reports your man below equally good at the tea-kettle and machinery. I can now have time to get my dinner comfortably, and Sandy can take a watch off, if necessary." Then he asks, "Where do you want to go to pass the evening?"

"Perhaps we had better stop at Key West for a few moments."

"Right you are!" says the Captain, gayly. "If you tie up there for ten minutes it will be a lift to me. I have got some dunnage ashore in a house

right near the wharf that I would like to overhaul and get out some light shirts this hot weather."

"That will be perfectly satisfactory," replies Estrabon, whose object now is to prolong the cruise and make the dinner a late one.

Coming back from this errand to the table, where the first course is just being put on, he remarks: "I took the liberty, Miss Vanstone, of telling Captain Thomas to head for Key West; we can then get the latest news about the *Competitor*. There is a breeze in the west channel, and we will be very comfortable in the quarter of an hour that we will be there. The dinner will go on just the same."

"Don Estrabon, heave ahead with the soup!" cries Rex, impatiently. "Don't you see the tureen is in front of you, and we are all waiting? Indra has not eaten an oyster, she has been so anxious for the soup."

"Oh, I forgot!" suddenly cries that young lady, who has been whispering eagerly to our Billy in some delicious confidence of first betrothal.

Looking at the two as they sit side by side, the Don's hand shakes a little as he handles the ladle, and a few drops of clear turtle soup fall upon the snowy damask of the yacht's table, which is brilliant with cut glass and painted china, and even decorated with flowers; Balasco having called upon Mr. Vanstone's gardener for the adornments to this yachting *fête*.

Then wine begins to flow, and tongues get unloosened, Estrabon, as Rex expresses it to himself, "doing his prettiest with the widow," who sits beside him. But Varona seems to be unusually

quiet, and now asks why Miss Gertie did not join the party.

"She could not come," laughs Rex. "It would have been necessary for Gertie to have become a little girl again. She has run out of long dresses." Then the boy babbles on: "You see, Gertie's grown so thundering modest since she's been in long dresses, these three days, that her ankles have now become veiled and sacred."

This is received by a little titter from Mrs. Ormiston, whose ankles are quite often unveiled, notwithstanding she regards them as sacred.

"My dear Rex," remarks Severance, in bachelor philosophy, "since the invention of the wheel, ladies' ankles are a drug on the market." Then he goes on solemnly: "And I'll be blowed if I like it!" turning a rather amused, yet significant glance on his *fiancée*, who has shown signs during the last season of having aspirations for the bike.

"By Jove! That's one on you, Indra!" cries Rex. "She had even ordered a wheel when the guv'nor came down on her. Yes, and got a bike costume too! She gave me a private view of it, and I tell you what, everybody missed a treat; it was thundering becoming. She would have looked like a fairy scorching."

"Anyway," murmurs Indra, laughing, "I shall soon be out of papa's leading strings, and then *Voilà*, the bike? Eh, Billy?" She looks inquiringly at the gentleman who sits beside her.

Upon this revelation Balasco turns eyes of disapproval.

"Pooh! Don't look so cross, my *caballero*!" jeers

the young lady, tossing an arch glance on the Spaniard, "or you'll never get a wife."

"I'm glad to see you frown, Don Estrabon," remarks Severance. "I know what's in your mind, and hang me if I don't agree with you!"

But if he had guessed, he would have taken the white throat of the gentleman sitting opposite to him in his great, big, powerful hands, and Balasco would have finished his dinner in Hades.

For this foreign gentleman does not approve of the wheel for one so intimately connected with him; as even now he regards as his own this young lady, who is blushing very prettily. He is just at this time thinking, savagely: "After to-morrow we will see, my dove, my darling, whether you will ride the bicycle."

Even as he cogitates, the boat runs beside one of the wharves at Key West, and a gangplank is put on shore. But no one pays much attention to it, except Rex, who calls out to Thomas as he walks off, to get any news that is floating about the town.

With this exception, the company in the little saloon of the *Flying Fish* devote themselves to knife, fork and conversation; Estrabon occupying his time in soft whispers with Amy Ormiston, appearing to wish to make a conquest of the coquetish widow who sits beside him, and in this is quite successful. He tells her little anecdotes of life in Spain, Brazil and Havana, for this gentleman has traveled a good deal, and delights her with an account of a bull-fight in Seville and some rather piquant anecdotes of high life in Madrid; to which the lady says, opening her innocent eyes: "My! You naughty Spaniards!"

The rest are all eating, drinking, and chatting vivaciously. Everything is going along successfully and merrily, when Captain Thomas, who has returned from the shore, puts his head into the door of the saloon.

"Any news?" cries Rex.

"Not a word!" answers the captain, "I just popped in, Don Balasco, to tell you there's a gentleman come on deck, who wants to see you immediately on business."

"Business!" cries the Don, "*Diantre!* What do I care whether tobacco goes up or down? Business on a yachting excursion at this time in the evening? Business!"

He goes to the door, and steps out savagely, to get a shock.

It is Mastic, the government detective, who stands awaiting him; the Varmint grinning just behind his shoulder.

"How the dickens did you get here?" ejaculates the Don. "You did not have time to get over to Coral Key and back here by this time in the *Gopher?*"

"No; I borrowed your steam-launch."

"*Caramba!* You took that liberty?"

"Well, yes. It was on your business. But come aft, where I can talk to you private." The revenue officer's eyes gleam cunningly. He leads the Don to the stern of the yacht, where no one is within earshot, and whispers: "I have discovered the arms are on board this yacht."

Then he watches to see what Estrabon will do or say.

But the Spanish gentleman has his nerves by

this time tuned up to any emergency. He answers: "You surprise me! You are sure?"

"Certain! That Varona is playing us!"

"We will ask Captain Thomas about it," says Balasco, "or rather, you ask him. I am only a guest on board this boat, and would not wish to make any trouble for the ladies." Here he calls to the captain, asking him to step aft.

This the sea-dog does, and in answer to questions from Mastic, replies shortly: "Yes, those arms are right in the hold. What difference does it make to you?"

"I am an officer of the Treasury Department," replies the detective, "and by virtue of the authority vested in me I seize those arms as being contraband to the neutrality of the United States."

"That's all right. Now they are yours!" interjects Balasco, interrupting the captain, who is saying something about "infernal cheek, and interfering with the rights of his vessel." Then the Spaniard pours oil upon the troubled waters, murmuring: "The arms are yours, of course, Señor Mastic, there is no question of that. But why should you disturb the ladies on this pleasant yachting party? Let us go back to Emerald Key, where we are bound for. To-morrow morning you can get them as well as to-night. An official seizure here, getting the arms out of the hold and putting them on shore would delay the *Flying Fish* several hours. She would be so late returning to Mr. Vanstone's villa that that gentleman would become alarmed, also his daughter."

"Yes; I'm afraid the little Gertie would be

frightened," says Mastic, rubbing his head dubiously.

"You propose to let the yacht go back to Emerald Key this evening?" asks Balasco, a thrill of anxiety in his voice.

"Certainly."

"A-a-a-h-h!" This is a sigh of relief.

"*But I go with them!*" says the detective in resolute voice.

"What? On board this yacht?"

"IF NOT I HAVE THOSE ARMS OUT OF THE HOLD AND ON THAT WHARF TO-NIGHT."

Mentally Balasco reels; outwardly he is calm. A moment after he pulls himself together and says to the captain: "Mr. Mastic's is the best way. No one need know of his being on board. You can make the revenue officer comfortable below, I suppose."

"Yes; I can give him the stateroom that the mate I fired to-day had. It's got two bunks in it and is comfortable enough."

"Very well. That is the way we'll arrange this affair. Now, what do you say, Mastic?"

"I'm agreeable."

Then, as the captain departs to make arrangements for the stateroom, Estrabon says, easily, to the detective: "Is there is anything else I can do for you?"

"Well, yes; as I'm going to be on board with you," laughs Mastic, "if I might suggest, a few of them cigars."

"Cigars? Oh! ah! I will get them for you," replies the Spaniard in a voice light, happy, buoyant.

He steps into the dining-saloon, a moment after comes out again, and presents a *Regalia Imperial* to the detective, saying: "We have not many on board; but if you want another, send for it. Here is one of a stronger brand for you, young man," he continues, presenting one of his dark *Invincibles* to the Varmint, who is standing near, grinning. "You smoke?" he asks, eagerly.

"Does that chimney?" remarks the Varmint, grinning toward the yacht's smokestack. "This 'ere's one of my kind; big as a sausage and black as a nigger!"

Then he and Mr. Mastic betake themselves to the stateroom of the mate and prepare to make a comfortable night of it.

"You fool!" thinks Estrabon, gazing after the detective's retreating form. Then he mutters these curious words: "What difference does two more make?" For now he is very desperate.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CIGARS OF DON BALASCO.

EVEN as this happens, he hears Thomas's voice commanding the lines to be thrown off. The yacht gets under way.

"Now to work!" he says to himself, cheerily, and stepping into the cabin, calls out, in gay voice: "Ah! You have got at the champagne ahead of me, *mis amigos*."

"Yes; this is a part of the meal I never wait for anybody," laughs Blakely, and the others chiming in with similar remarks, Estrabon is pleased to

note that the gentlemen have all grown a little merrier, somewhat more careless and much more convivial from the wine they have already drunk. Dessert is on the table, and Varona now cries: "Where are the cocktails?"

"I shall substitute cocktails for coffee."

At this unheard-of innovation there are one or two dissenting voices; but the Don, who has some general toxicological information, remarks, laughingly: "It is a Spanish fashion, and I think you will pronounce my brew preferable to Mocha. My champagne cocktails are a work of art," he goes on, enthusiastically. "Champagne that changes despair into hope, that makes men forget there is a Hades and gives to them the joys of Heaven—fleeting, perhaps, but still the delights of Paradise—becomes even more celestial, when it has added to it a lump of sugar saturated with the essences that I employ."

"Bravo!" cries Rex, and the widow claps her hands, as Balasco says to the steward, commandingly: "Give me the ingredients!"

"What are them?" asks the servitor.

"Dry champagne—*brut* of any kind—and one, two, three, four, five, six—*six* lumps of crystallized sugar."

"Hold on!" shouts Rex. "You're forgetting yourself. *Seven* lumps of sugar."

"Ah! God bless you, my boy. That would have been a terrible mistake," murmurs Estrabon. Then he adds: "Preferably the sugar of the beet—it dissolves more slowly—and Angostura bitters! The other condiments are *my* art," he murmurs.

What he has called for being placed before him, the Don produces from his pocket a silver flask that contains, perhaps, an ounce or two of "my secret," as he calls it laughingly, and proceeds to drop ten drops of the liquid very carefully upon each lump of sugar, one of these being placed in each of the seven deep champagne tumblers, adding afterward to each glass a small modicum of Angostura bitters.

"Now, steward," he cries, is that champagne ice cold—not *frappé*—ice cold?"

"To a temperature," answers that functionary, who has been looking with eager eyes upon the Don's operations, hoping to catch Balasco's secret, which may be useful to him on other cruises.

The rest of the party, however, pay very little attention to the manufacture. They are content to chat and wait for the coming nectar. The processes of its preparation do not interest them very greatly.

"It's the effects I want," says Rex. "I never care to see a barkeeper mix my toddy. All I want to know is when it hits me that it goes to—to the right spot!"

"Hush!" replies Indra reprovingly, for the boy's tone and manner indicate that he is getting beyond the right spot himself. Then the girl adds: "Rex, don't drink any more champagne," and would probably carry her point, did she not make the great mistake of adding to her remonstrance: "You know you're so young."

"Young?" cries Rex. "Good Heavens! Will a man never get old enough to have the enjoyments of this world?" And Balasco's cocktail

being handed to him by the steward, he gulps it down, smacks his lips over it, and says: "That's prime!" though in truth it tastes a little bitter to him.

The other men drink theirs also; Blakeley and Severance paying but slight attention to the flavor; though Varona remarks: "I don't think these are quite up to the ones I drank with you in Key West three years ago."

The ladies, however, after sipping about half of theirs, remark they think they are too bitter and prefer sweeter champagne. This is satisfactory enough to Balasco. He does not care much that Indra and Amy drink any more of his cocktails; especially as he sees the remains of these as they are taken away, quaffed hastily down in the steward's pantry by that servitor and the cook.

"Ah! You like it?" he says, affably, stepping to the door of that room.

"Prime!" says the steward, who is expecting to be reproved.

"Very well. Take mine and divide it between you. I will brew another for myself later on." remarks Balasco. He hands them his glass, and is pleased to see that its contents trickle down the throats of cook and steward.

"By the by," says Rex, "where are your wonderful cigars—those *Regalias Imperiales*?"

"What!" Have I forgotten them?" and the Don places on the table the box he had re-rolled so carefully in Key West. "I will take one or two for the captain; I have to speak to him."

Then, producing from a locker, where he has placed it, the *Maduro* box of *Invincibles*, he puts

these in his pocket, and going forward, thinks, "God bless that boy! He reminded me of something I had for the moment forgotten."

The crew are gathered together near the bow of the yacht, which is now driving south, so as to give any outlying reefs a good offing before she turns to the east. Here, encountering Juan, of the big ear, he gives the major portion of the box of his *Invincibles* to him, and says, "Distribute these with the compliments of Balasco, among the crew and coal-passers."

He knows none of his men will touch them. His engineer and steersman only smoke cigarettes, of which, after the Cuban fashion, they carry multitudes—besides this, they have all been warned.

"I have taken the liberty," he says, as he joins Captain Thomas in the pilot-house, "we being on our way home, to distribute a few cigars among the hands."

"That's all right," answers the captain. "Every mother's son of them smokes like blue blazes." Then he adds, suggestively: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?" says Estrabon.

"The skipper," remarks the sea-dog, with a grin.

"O-oh! I had forgotten *you*! A thousand pardons?" and the Don smilingly presents to Thomas two of his black *Invincibles*, guessing a strong and potent weed will probably suit that tar's palate.

"Thanks!" replies Thomas, lighting up. A moment after he says: "Sandy is a smoker, too. Don't forget the engine-room, cigarmaker. It don't cost you much; you're in the business."

"Forget the engineer?" cries Estrabon, with a

start. "NEVER!" and, opening the window that connects with the engine-room, he calls: "Sandy, would you like a smoke?"

"Wud I lek tae gae tae Heaven?" replies Sandy, in broad Scotch accent.

The Don tosses him a couple of his black ones; then comes back to the cabin again to find the gentlemen, though they are drinking and smoking, are doing it in not quite so hilarious a way as they had been a few minutes before.

A moment later Mrs. Ormiston says: "Indra, do you know I—I think we had better leave the gentlemen. Our presence keeps them from after-dinner conviviality." This last is embellished by a slight yawn.

"Well, I'm a little sleepy myself," remarks Miss Vanstone; next she languidly asks: "How long will it be before we are back at Emerald Key?"

"About two hours," answers Belasco.

"I think we have—we have time for a nap," says the young lady. "Mrs. Ormiston, let us go down to the state cabins."

"By Jove! If I feel like I do ten minutes from now, I'll turn in myself," observes Severance. "I shall lie down on one of the cushioned settees here. We must have stayed up very late last night at the ball."

"Yes; it was four o'clock," says Indra as he assists the ladies down the companionway that leads to the boudoir below. Here, under the light of a single incandescent, she turns and remarks to her sweetheart happily: "You know, Billy, we must wake up early to-morrow morning. We've another happy day before us."

As for her great, big fiancé, he looks at his sweetheart a little sleepily, then mutters : " Yes ; I—I imagine it would be a good idea to stay on the yacht all night ; not turn out even after we get to—to anchorage."

" Perhaps it would be as well. What do you think, Mrs. Ormiston ?" says Indra. " I'm awfully sleepy ; supposing we go to bed. Our state cabins are very comfortable."

The only answer to this by the pretty widow, who is usually very vivacious, is a prolonged yawn as the ladies disappear.

Five minutes after, Indra Vanstone puts her fair head upon a lace pillow in one of the state cabins of the boat, and goes to sleep, dreamily, but happily, and feeling as secure as if she were in her own chamber at Emerald Key, or even in their big town residence in New York. And why should she not ? Bluff and ready Thomas is at the wheel. The craft is as stanch a little boat as floats. The night is perfect ; the air is balmy. Her brother is in the saloon above ; her chaperone sleeps in the adjoining stateroom ; and above all, is not the man to whom she would most readily trust her young life in all this world, on deck watching over her ; do not even now her fair young lips remember the good-night kiss he has placed upon them in the retirement of the ladies' cabin ?

Balasco, pacing the deck, warily gives a passing glance into the saloon. The men are talking and smoking very languidly. Rex has gone to sleep in his chair. The cook and steward have given up waiting on them, and are smoking two of his

black *Invincibles*, in a lazy, sleepy, half-conscious way.

He steps forward. One or two of the crew are asleep upon the deck.

Then Thomas's voice comes to him from the pilot-house, saying: "Is that you, Balasco? Send your man here to take the wheel. I'm so infernal drowsy, I can hardly see Sand Key Light." As he steps to him, the Captain mutters: "Here! Take the spokes yourself. Darn it! I can't see the points of the compass, I'm so dead drowsy. Call your man up! Tell him to steer back to Emerald Key. He knows the course—as-well—as-I-do." This last is a long-drawn-out yawn.

"Certainly," says Balasco, and takes the wheel just in time, for the skipper's head falls forward. He stumbles onto the long cushioned seat at the back of the pilot-house, and a moment after his stentorian snores keep time to the pulse of the engines.

But Balasco does not change the course of the yacht, and she drives slightly west of south, straight for the Cuban coast.

A moment later, his helmsman comes up, and says: "Let me relieve you, Señor Don!"

And he says to him: "Keep the same course."

"*Por Dios!* That will take us west of Havana—we are heading right straight to Cuba."

"Yes;" replies Balasco. "Straight to Cuba. I must be there by to-morrow morning. It is business of importance, and there's five hundred dollars for you if you do my bidding."

A moment later his negro engineer shouts up through the open window from the engine-room,

saying: "I'll have to keep watch alone. The Scotch engineer has fallen to sleep."

"Very good," returns Don Balasco. "Only drive the boat for all she is worth."

"That can't be done," replies the man. "The coal-passers are asleep likewise."

"Yes; but my two men, the deck-hands forward, are not," answers Estrabon. He goes to the bow, and, getting hold of big-eared Juan and little-eared Pablo, sets them to work firing the furnaces under the direction of his negro engineer.

So the boat drives through the night, steering a course well west of south, which, taking into consideration the drift of the Gulf Stream which they are crossing, will take them some twenty miles west of Havana.

And on the deck paces the Don, sleepless as a cat. And in the cabin lie the forms of his companions of the dinner-party, breathing somewhat more slowly than they are wont to do, and sleeping very heavily; "my secret" having worked with them very well.

Looking at them, Balasco snarls: "Two are the enemies of my country, and would destroy its glory, and one has stolen her love from me. Why should I not make her ransom their lives?" But as he gazes at big Jack Blakely, who is snoring heavily, he murmurs regretfully: "He is a good fellow—a damned good fellow!" And for one instant he repents and calls out to the steersman: "Put the boat about!"

"What? Back to Emerald Key?" asks the man.

"Emerald Key! where I have suffered the tor-

tures of the inferno?" screams the Don, waving his hands wildly. Then his eye chancing to light on Rex, who makes a pretty picture of young manhood, his fair hair tossing disheveled over the crimson cushion, he murmurs: "She loves them; she must redeem them!" and calls out: "No!" to the steersman, who is already commencing to revolve the spokes of the wheel. "Keep her on her course—drive her. Get us to Cuba!"

All that night Estrabon paces the deck, dreaming dreams of his coming bride, half delirious with pleasure, and murmuring: "She'll be mine, TO-DAY!—in all her beauty, her loveliness; mine, and no other man's! Her fair cheeks shall be pressed against mine, her red lips shall be mine to kiss, to caress—to make me happy, as long as I live on this earth. Aha! Congratulations, Balasco! To-day you are a benedict."

About six o'clock in the morning daylight comes. He sees the coast of Cuba dimly in the distance; then gasps suddenly: "If they wake up *too soon*!" next cries out triumphantly: "Ah! Magendie! Little Gertie's gift to me! I will keep her Cuban lover asleep, and this man who would rob me, and anybody who would come between me and the priest and the wedding-ring and the bride: Indra, *mi querida*! The captain, the crew—all! They must sleep until it is too late for them to aid her or aid themselves, *if it is necessary*." This last with a sinister grin.

Then he goes about, overlooking no one. The cook receives a hypodermic injection of ten drops; the steward likewise. The arm of each of the reclining forms in the saloon that are now

breathing so soundly in the sleep of morphine receives the ten drops; and he is just in time with one of them. Big Jack Blakely, as he jabs the needle in his arm, opens his eyes in a dazed kind of way, then gazing in Balasco's face mutters: "You infernal villain!" and reaches out his great arms, but the drug overcomes him, and he rolls over and snores again. The deck hands, the coal-passers, the Scotch engineer, and the captain receive their hypodermic. Then he goes about, saying: "Now, they are bound more strongly than in chains of iron. Manacles could be knocked off in a moment; but these must last until the time. Have I forgotten nothing—*nothing*—NOTHING? I have arranged it all in my mind. Arms—Varona, Maceo's officer—the yacht—a filibuster on the coast of Cuba—flying the flag of the United States—the flag we despise. I have thought for every one. I am correct. Within six hours my darling ransoms these men's lives, or *they are dead men!* And what will be her answer? Her brother! her lover! the man her sister loves! the man she loves! Ah! it is really true. To-day the wedding bells—and then the honeymoon cruise! I have gone over the plan so many times—step by step, man by man—all is certain—nothing is undone. God bless you, Balasco, you who have forgotten *nothing!*"

But he has!

He has forgotten to give the ten drops of morphine injection to Thomas Duff Mastic of the United States Revenue Service, and the Varmint, his boy, who are sleeping in the cabin of the second mate.

These men had come into his plan as a side issue—they had been put out of it by a side issue—he had with quick instinct sent them asleep by his prepared cigars; but now they have slipped his memory—not being in his original plot, which he has worked out over and over by day, by night, till it has assumed the accuracy of mathematics.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“THE TRIUMPH OF BALASCO.”

ABOUT seven o'clock in the morning, in the stateroom of the second mate, the Varmint wakes up, yawns and wonders why they are not back at Emerald Key; as a glance through the little port-hole shows him the sun is already up.

“Darn it, I don't care!” mutters the boy. “It will keep me a little longer from a larruping.” For he fears that Alligator Pete may resent his sudden desertion of the night before from the *Gopher*. Then he slides out of his bunk, puts on his sea-boots, and goes stamping about noisily, to awake Mastic, who is snoring in the berth beside him; as he does not dare to return to the schooner without the protection, explanations, and apology of the detective.

But seeing the revenue man still sleeps contentedly, the boy mutters: “Darn'd if I dare face Pete without him,” then suddenly says: “What does it matter, yit. By Hookey, we're not back at Emerald Key, anyway!” gets into his berth again and goes to sleep.

But his slumber is now a light one, and it is very shortly disturbed by the noise of something being done immediately outside the door of the stateroom. Things soft and heavy are being placed in the little passage. He can hear the dump, regular and continuous, and the stamp of men's feet. He does not pay much attention to this, as the cook's galley is opposite, and goes to sleep, to be once more awakened by the stoppage of the boat.

"Emerald Key!" he cries, jumps up, and puts his head out of the little porthole, which is on the port side of the vessel. After a moment's inspection, the boy ejaculates: "Gol darn it, where are we, anyway? What thunderin' place is this? I'll git on deck and see."

On attempting to open the door of the stateroom, he finds he cannot move it any more than he could stir a coral reef. Something is against it, preventing the opening of the door, which swings out into the passage to give all possible room in the mate's cabin, which is very small.

"It's something as heavy," mutters the Varmint, as he pants with pushing shoulder against it, "as the best bower of a Plant liner."

Then he calls out once or twice: "Here! Git this stuff away, cook! I want to git out!" but receives no answer to this, except from Mastic, who is now looking at him and growling: "Gol darn it! What are you rousing me up fur, Varmint? Can't you keep your tongue in your jaws?"

"We can't git out," says the boy. "We've been steaming all night. We've just stopped now. And hang me if I know where we've got to. I wanted to git on deck, and can't git out."

"Can't get out?" says the detective, springing up and putting his shoulder to the door, without effect. Suddenly he ejaculates: "Been steaming all night?" and pops his face out of the porthole, to bring it back again, astonished, and gasp: "By Jove! This looks like the coast of Cuba." Suddenly he snorts: "Varona has played both the Don and me. This is Cuba! He has brought the arms here!" Then he mutters in chagrin and vexation of spirit: "Run away with! My heaven! I'll be jeered by every customs man in the country. Run away with, after I'd made a seizure, and now cooped up like a rat in a trap!" next goes on savagely: "But I'll teach him to play tricks on the United States Revenue Service!" and is putting on his clothes hurriedly and vigorously, when suddenly to him from a little ventilator in the deck above come words of passion and pleading—of a woman's despair—of a man's triumph—in a conversation that, as it reaches the detective's ears, is broken up, disjointed—yet still makes Mr. Mastic listen and his eyes grow big, and his cheeks grow white, and the hair stand up on his head.

Then he whispers to the Varmint, whose eyes grow big too, and whose short hair stands up also. For what Mastic says is: "My God, boy! We've been brought here to be slaughtered by the damned Spaniards! Murdered with no more chance than a pair of pizened 'gators!" Next he whispers: "Keep quiet! We must get out of here, or we're dead men."

But the boy gasps: "We can't move that door!"

Then Mastic suddenly ejaculates: "Great snakes!

It's Don Estrabon who has played us all! Who means to have every mother's son of us butchered by the coming gunboat! We must light out of here. See what is holding us! Cut through the panel! Work for your life, Varmint!"

And the boy does work, with his big sailor-knife, upon the thinnest part of the door; and, after a few minutes, he scratches his head and says: "By sharks! Darn me, if I don't think it's flour!"

"By Heaven! Estrabon has had this door banked up to keep us caged! Work for your blood, body and bones, Varmint!" mutters Mastic; for sounds now come to him that make the detective more desperate than ever.

And he has guessed right!

The noise that the boy made, as he slapped about in his sailor-boots to wake Mastic at seven in the morning, had been reported to Balasco, and that gentleman had suddenly clapped his hands to his head, and muttered: "I forgot! *Dios mio!* I forgot the revenue man and his boy! Now it is too late!" for he dares not go in to give his hypodermic to sentient men.

Therefore he has had cautiously piled up against the door of their stateroom, what was most convenient, and, he thought, effective and silent—some thirty odd hundredweight of flour, in one-hundred-pound sacks, that could be brought conveniently from the cook's storeroom.

* * * * *

It is about nine o'clock in the morning, when Miss Indra Vanstone wakes up, gives a pretty little yawn, stretches her white arms over her

head and gazing at the blue draperies of the state-cabin, looks for a moment astonished; then exclaims: "Oh, I remember now! I suppose Billy—" she sighs out this word in a dreamy, contented manner—"thought it best not to have me awakened when we got back to Emerald Key." For the boat has stopped its motion, but only just stopped it, though Indra does not know it, and the sudden quiet of its machinery has roused her—a very usual thing at sea.

A moment later, there is a sharp tap at the door of her stateroom, and Estrabon's voice says: "Are you awake, Miss Vanstone?"

"Oh, it is you, Don Balasco, is it?"

"Yes; please come on deck immediately. I have something to show you."

"I hope it's breakfast," answers the young lady; then asks: "Where are the rest? Have they gone on shore to breakfast at the house? Were they afraid to awake us two lazy birds?" A hasty glance through the open door into Mrs. Ormiston's stateroom has just shown Miss Vanstone that her chaperone is still enjoying the delights of morning slumber.

"Yes. Come on deck! I have something to show you, and then I hope to be able to offer you breakfast."

"Breakfast first!" calls Indra, cheerily, and being hungry hurries her toilet. So some fifteen minutes after, Miss Vanstone issues from her stateroom into the ladies' cabin, looking very piquant, bright and fresh in her spotless white muslin of the evening before, which drapes very gracefully her exquisite figure, the pink ribbons

on it giving it dainty little fluffs of color. It is a sight on which Don Balasco's eyes feast themselves in an easy, careless way that rather astonishes the young lady.

Just here Mrs. Ormiston's voice comes to her, saying, sleepily: "Please tell the steward to put some coffee for me in the ladies' cabin."

"I will attend to it," remarks Miss Vanstone, and closing the door she turns to Estrabon, whose manner apparently impresses her, for she asks, suddenly: "Is anything the matter?" Then, chancing to look out of a porthole on the starboard side of the vessel, which is headed for the west, she ejaculates: "Goodness! Why we're at sea!"

"Not exactly," replies Balasco. "But come on deck. Time is very precious." And he goes up the aft companionway, the one not leading through the saloon.

A moment later, Indra is by his side and looking in rapture about her.

"Oh, how heavenly! What a beautiful place you've brought us to!" exclaims the girl; then she seizes a marine glass that lies upon one of the skylights of the yacht, and feasts her eyes upon a scene that is only possible in the tropics.

The yacht is in some bay or slight indentation of a tropic coast. Around her are the blue waters of the West Indies—that deep, peculiar, wondrous blue that travelers write about. It flicks in lazy ripples the white form of the yacht, which seems wondrously still, though the dark cloud rising from the *Flying Fish's* smokestack indicates her fires are blazing, and the sound of escaping steam tells of

boilers ready to put immediate and rapid way upon the vessel.

To the north, on the starboard side of the fairy craft, is nothing but blue water to the horizon. On the port, to the south, the azure ripples last scarce quarter of a mile, then roll in languid swell, which scarcely puts foam upon them, against a low white beach, very narrow, fringed to its edge with all the glorious, luxuriant foliage of a land upon which no winter comes. Palms, ferns, orchids of gay colors, feathery bamboos, trailing vines, cover a dozen little hills, backed in the distance by blue mountains. A little estuary runs into the bay. On one of the hills, quite near the water, are a few huts, a large white dwelling-house unoccupied and half consumed by fire; beyond more small cottages apparently in ruins; then a village chapel, built, as well as the girl can see, of crumbling adobe brick, and half grown over with vines and tendrils; in its little belfry, one of whose supports is broken, a time-stained bell of brass or bronze.

But one human being is in the vision of the field-glass. A copper-stained boy, who has been fishing in a canoe or boat, is doing his best to get away from them, and, succeeding very well, for as Indra puts the telescope down, he disappears round a neighboring point, paddling for his life.

Above is blue sky. The songs of birds come to her. A flamingo of gay plumage is fishing on a little tide-washed shoal. Everything is calm, quiet, peaceful, and at rest.

"Is this part of our picnic cruise?" queries the young lady in happy voice, then cries: "I must

run down and show Mrs. Ormiston what a beautiful place you've brought us to!" next babbles, "Are not the gentlemen up, the lazy fellows?"

But a detaining hand is laid—somewhat heavily, the girl thinks—upon her soft arm, and a voice that is hoarse with intensity whispers: "This is my part of the picnic cruise. This is Cuba."

"Cuba!" Miss Vanstone echoes, astounded.

For the first part of this interview is all astonishment; afterwards come fright, panic, horror, then despair unutterable.

Just now something in the Don's manner impresses Miss Indra. She opens her eyes very wide, and asks: "Why have you brought us to Cuba? We were to go to Emerald Key. Papa and Gertie will be anxious. This is an extraordinary joke, Don Estrabon!" Then suddenly the girl exclaims, in tones more astounded than angry: "What could Captain Thomas be thinking of? I will have papa discharge him."

"Come; let me show you something."

"First let me see Captain Thomas."

"You shall see him. You shall see them—*all!*"

"All? I do not understand."

"No! But you will!"

He leads her to the door of the saloon, and looking in, the girl ejaculates: "O goodness!" Then, as if not believing her eyes, she goes on: "It can't be possible they're all——! Tell me, Don Balasco, they're not all *drunk?*"

For the attitudes of the four sleeping men, as they have fallen on the settees and chairs of the cabin amid the empty bottles standing upon the

table, and the unremoved service of the elaborate dinner of the night before, betoken a banquet that has ended in a debauch of wine.

"No; they are not *drunk*."

"Not drunk?" exclaims Indra, astounded; for she is now trying to awaken Rex, shaking the boy, and saying: "I'm ashamed of you, my brother! I'm astonished at you! It's disgraceful!"

At Estrabon's words she pauses, looks at the fair face whose eyes are closed and the limp form she is shaking, and suddenly screams, apprehension in her eyes, "Heavens and earth! They are *dead*!"

"No! Not dead."

"Not dead!" Then she listens at his heart and mutters: "Yes. Thank God! He is breathing—but how slowly." For Rex, as well as the others, now exhibits all the effects of sleep under morphine, though Indra knows this not, and continues excitedly: "But they're *ill*. They're *breathing* so slowly! They're *dying*!"

"They *are* dying," says the Don.

"Oh merciful heavens! What can we do to save them?"

"I can do nothing! *You* can do everything!"

"I don't understand you. But do something—do something, *quick*! Don Balasco, I implore you! What is the matter with them? Do something QUICK!"

"There is no immediate danger to these gentlemen. They are safe for an hour or two. In that time you can save their lives."

"I—?" On Indra's face anxiety is dominated by amazement.

"Sit down. Listen to me," says the Don, in musical voice, from which it is difficult to keep out the note of triumph. "Here is a steamer-chair," as the girl is commencing to tread the deck excitedly. "Permit me——"

"Don't talk! Do something!"

"To save their lives, you must listen to me. Oblige me by being seated."

"O-o-h!" and Indra does his bidding.

"You see how you are delaying things. Listen to me. This is Cuba!" He speaks this slowly, eyeing the girl curiously all the while. "This vessel is one with arms on board—arms smuggled to aid the insurgents, presumably by Varona, an officer of Maceo's staff, who is in that cabin. Seven miles away, at Cabañas," he points to the east, "there is probably a Spanish gunboat; if not, certainly at Muriel, twelve miles further. The officers of these boats doubtless know by this time—if not, in a few minutes will be signaled, of the landing of a filibuster."

"A filibuster! What are you talking about?"

"This vessel—the *Flying Fish*!"

"A filibuster? This is a yacht!" cries the girl, "protected by the flag of the United States."

"The United States!" he laughs. "Did that flag protect the consumptive boy shot on the Yankee schooner twenty-five years ago?" He points mockingly to the American ensign that is now waving at the peak, and goes on, a jeer in his voice: "It is the flag that Spain hates—nay, more, despises. Ask your dead captives on the high seas; the thirty-two of the *Virginus*; the *Competitor's* crew and passengers of to-day; the traveling

newspaper correspondents whose passports have been torn up in their faces as they have been macheted in the fields over yonder!" his gesture indicates the beautiful shore. "Ask any one whose death Spain really *wished* whether that flag ever protected them, away from the very hands of your consuls, and sometimes even not then."

"Yes, I know," sighs the girl. "But still, I cannot understand——"

"I must show you more!"

But she does not listen to him and goes to crying, excitedly: "Captain Thomas! Captain Thomas! *Dear* Captain Thomas! Please come to me!"

"Thomas will listen to you no more than all the others. He is there in the pilot-house. Do you see him?—asleep—the sleep of opium! Look forward! This vessel is now *armed*!"

And the girl, glancing toward the bow of the boat, sees in position the rapid-fire gun that Severance had spoken of, which has been brought on deck and mounted, and she gasps: "Impossible!" then mutters: "I do not understand."

"Observe, we are a true filibuster, just the same as the *Competitor*," laughs the Don. "You know what happened to her crew—her passengers? Only this will be *worse*!"

"Worse! What do you mean?"

"I mean the slaughter will be immediate. No Spanish officer will again bring in filibusters alive."

To this the girl cries out sternly, though her lips grow white: "These men are not filibusters!" "Our government would know and avenge!"

Her eyes, however, are growing very frightened.

"By a protest, that will be answered by an apology, and the promotion of the Spanish officers. It is the usual formula. For further particulars see the cases of the *Virginius* and the *Grapeshot*," Balasco sneers; then goes on decidedly: "But apology will not bring our Rex and our Billy back to life. Besides, you remember what Ramon predicted: The next will be a silent massacre; the vessel destroyed, the crew butchered and thrown overboard."

"Then get us away from here! Call to the engine-room! Where's Sandy, the engineer? Here, *Sandy*!" screams Indra, springing up. "SANDY!"

But getting no answer, she turns eyes in which horror is taking the place of astonishment upon this man who seems to jeer her fears and mock her perturbation.

"It will be useless to call him," remarks Estrabon. "Sandy is asleep also." Then he utters, in tones of sinister suggestion: "They all went to sleep last night, at *my* request."

"You—have—done—this?" whispers the girl, slowly; then suddenly cries out: "WHY?"

"BECAUSE I WANT YOU TO BUY THESE MEN'S LIVES FROM ME."

"My Heaven! What do you mean?"

"I stand here on deck. My negro engineer is in that engine-room. This vessel is not even anchored. Within ten minutes, if I, Balasco, give order, we are beyond the three-mile limit; within an hour, we are far away out on that blue sea. The yacht has speed enough to distance any

Spanish gunboat. You have but to grant me one little favor, and then the propeller is in motion, and we are all safe. Won't they be grateful to you—Rex, Varona, Blakely, Our Billie, whose lives you have saved! You will be the heroine of the yacht." He laughs out the names triumphantly.

"I hardly think I understand you," falters the young lady, who is still dazed with astonishment. This curious thing has come upon her so like a thief in the night. Then her voice becomes suddenly hoarse—her blue eyes have dread in them. She whispers: "What do you mean? What favor?"

"Be my wife!"

"You are mad!"

"Be *Dona* Balasco!"

"My Heavens! Don't you know that I am going to marry the man I love?"

"You are going to marry *me*!"

"Never!" answers the girl, and darting into the cabin she throws her arms around Severance's big bulk and cries: "My Billy, wake up and protect me from this man! Wake up and save your own life!"—for now the subtlety of the Spaniard's design comes home to her.

But the eyes she loves do not open to her, and the form she tries to fondle into action still sleeps and falls back upon the cushion of the settee on which it lies.

"You see *they* can do nothing, but *you* have many to save. Their lives are forfeit to Spain. In an hour from now they will be butchered. You may be in chains, like the woman landed the other

day. You remember I read about it last evening to you!"

"And you?" suddenly jeers Indra frantically. "You—and your coward engineer and dastard deck-hands!" and she points to Pablo and Juan, "and your coward steersman, who have not raised a hand to aid me, what will become of you?"

"I am safe. I have here," observes Estrabon, "such papers signed by the Captain-General, and am so well-known by description to all Spanish officers—besides I have made such arrangements—that I and those over whom I place the ægis of my protection will be as safe as if there was not a rebel in Cuba!"

"Then place it over these men who were your friends of yesterday—with whom you supped last night!"

"That is impossible. Varona is a rebel officer. Did not your Billy's money fit out an insurgent expedition to this island, of which these arms on board are the relics? Do you suppose that I, who am the agent of Spain, would save *them*?"

"The agent of Spain?" whispers the girl, aghast, and puts her hands to her eyes as if dazed—but this is only for a moment—then she breaks out: "You played the friend of Cuba to betray them! Ah, the drugged wine! I understand you now—traitor! dastard!"

"That was part of my arrangement. But I need hardly remind you, Miss Vanstone, that every moment you spend in idle words with me adds to the danger of those you love. Every moment is bringing a Spanish gunboat nearer to give to those you love death!"

"Then give the order to leave here, for God's sake, Don Balasco!—*please!*—PLEASE! Tell your engineer to put on steam. That is all I want—just a little *steam*—just to hear the machinery move—just to know that they are moving toward life. My Billy! Rex, my brother! Ramon, whom my sister loves! MERCY!" and she is on her knees, kissing his hand, and sobbing: "Have I not always treated you kindly?"

"Too kindly," says the Don, solemnly. Then his eyes blaze in fervid passion, and he whispers: "You have taught me to love you so that I have sworn that no other man shall win you; that your beauties, your loveliness—Indra, *mi querida! mi paloma!*—shall be for me, and for no other man." And he would put his arms down to caress her and lift her up and fondle her.

But the girl, rising haughtily, shudders from him, and awes him by becoming a white statue of despair; for she now begins to look like fair young brides who, in ancient days, have seen their bridegrooms slain as they have looked on pirates' love and lust on this same sea. Her hat has fallen from her head, unheeded. Her hair has come unbound, and floats about her like a golden web, its long tresses adorning her exquisite figure and decking her face to give her new beauties in the eyes of this man; to give her less chance of winning mercy from him!"

"You see," observes Balasco, "what you are to ransom. All those you love."

Then he goes on, in words that strike her heart: "It is not my hand I offer you, but their life—or *their death!*"

"Marry *you*?" Indra falters, with white lips, as if she cannot realize the proposition.

"Are not the lives of those you love worth a few words at the altar?—a wedding ring? Is not *my love* worth *something*?" There is a wail of anguish in the Don's voice, for as he looks upon her wondrous beauty, he would give almost his triumph for one tittle of her heart.

"Why, marry you?" stammers his victim; "certainly, Don Balasco," as with attempted archness she murmurs: "Take me back to my father and I will say the words;" and the poor, tormented thing thinks her pitiful ruse has won.

"Bah!" sneers the Don. "When I take you back to your father he will be *my* father; you shall be then *my* wife. See! the boat is at the gangway. In five minutes we are on shore. The priest in that little chapel is waiting. Do you hear the church bells ringing? I sent a message. The *padre* is now ready. Come with me. Let us kneel before the holy father and have his blessing and come back—it will take scarce twenty minutes—and you are *Dona* Balasco. The state-cabins will not be uncomfortable for a honeymoon cruise. You said that yourself, you remember, two days ago. But then you thought of 'Our Billee;' now you think of *me*. Ha! ha! ME! Now you think of Balasco, eh? *Esposa mia!*"

And the Don's eyes light up with fervid passion as he gazes on the beautiful being whose very despair makes her more lovely. For Indra's gestures have now a peculiar nervous grace, her eyes are radiant and flashing; her rounded bosom is

panting as if it were the waves of the sea. Then, with a quick move, his arm would go round that delicate waist, he would caress and fondle her, he loves her so!

But with a shuddering shriek she staggers from him and gasps: "No! My God! I cannot do it!" Then great sobs without tears come from her. She goes to pleading as if her heart were breaking: "Have pity! Have mercy! These men were your friends! You supped with them last night!"—next mutters hoarsely, wringing her hands: "And you gave them that accursed decoction that has taken their senses from them and will take their *lives* from them!"

"No; it will be you who will take their lives!" Then he continues: "You have so little time! If you knew how little time you have you would fly to the priest to become *Dona* Balasco. The *padre* could not say the church service over us too quickly."

"I cannot do it! I cannot do it! How can you ask this of me?" begs the girl, frantically. "You know how I love him! Do you think in one moment I can pluck my love out of my heart and give it to you?"

To this he suddenly cries: "SEE!" and points. And Indra, following his hand toward the east, gives out an affrighted, unnatural scream.

For away in the distance is a thin, black cloud of vapor just discernible, and she knows what it means, and he knows what it means, as he whispers: "The coming gunboat! The coming *death*! These decks will soon be a shambles! Rex, he dies, and I take care that he shall wake up to know

his sister sacrificed him ; Billy, ' me Billee ' shall cry out : ' You have murdered me ! ' "

" Billy ! " mutters the victim. " Billy ! If it depended upon him, I'd let your Spanish murderers kill him and kill me rather than marry you, because this will break my Billy's heart and mine. But it is Rex, papa's darling ! " and she sobs. " My father's gray hairs ! Have mercy on him ! "

" Have mercy on him yourself. It rests with you ! Only you have so little time. I am always trying to impress on you you have so *little* time. " And the glory of winning lights Balasco's face. Since the smoke of the gunboat the Don sees she is yielding.

For Indra is now panting out : " The smoke is coming nearer ! That gunboat is steaming very fast ! My God ! Tell them to start the machinery ! Just the machinery ! I want to see that screw moving ! " Then ends this with a piercing scream, and she is on her knees to him, kissing his hand and fondling it, and begging him, " I will marry you. Quick ! As you hope for mercy, rescind that order ! Call to your man to stop ! He's letting out their life-blood ! "

For the Don has suddenly said : " I am tired of paltering, " and has called sharply to the engineer : " Put out the fires ! Let the steam in the boilers off ! The yacht stays here ! *Tell the deckhands to anchor !* "

Then, to the sound of the hissing vapor that means the death of all those about her that she loves, the girl goes through her litany of despair ; she whispers : " I consent. "

" You will marry me ? "

"Yes. Now! Quick! Stop that escaping steam!"

"And be my wife?"

"And be your wife! Tell the engineer——"

"Until death do us part?"

"That won't be long! That won't be long!"

"Until death do us part?"

"Until death do us part!"

"Ah! If this were New York, we were wedded now," says the Don, gayly. Then he calls: "Pedro, shut off the steam. Keep up your fires. I have changed my mind. We sail within a few minutes."

"And now, Indra—my dream that is reality ——" He turns, with passion in his eye and a thrill in every vein, and would, perchance, have placed a betrothal kiss upon her; but the girl is not beside him. She has flown into the saloon, and is fondling Severance and begging him to forgive her; and is crying, "My Billy! It is to save your life!"

But she is plucked from this dalliance by a stern hand, and for the first time, looks up and sees her lord and master, and he says: "Remember! I, Estrabon Balasco, am a jealous man. Your lips are for me—your husband. Let us haste to the triumph of Balasco's love!"

At this she mutters to him: "Coward!" but the lovely eyes seem to droop under his fiery glance, for now he gazes at this beauty as if he owned her.

"Aha! My pretty one! Don't call your future husband names," he laughs; then murmurs: "Forgive my exultation—forgive my strat-

agem; you will in time. I'll be so doting a husband!" And he pats reassuringly her fair shoulder that gleams so white beneath the muslin of her dress.

But suddenly the girl commences wringing her hands and crying out to him: "That gunboat is coming. The smoke is so *near*! We won't have time! We won't have time!"

"We will have ample. The Spanish vessel cannot get here for an hour and a half," murmurs Estrabon, placidly. "That smoke is still well beyond Cabañas; she must have come from Muriel. We shall have plenty of time for the wedding—my own—my pet—my dove!" And he would place a kiss on her lips.

But Indra breaks from him with unnatural strength and shudders: "*Not yet!* NOT YET!" then mutters, commandingly: "I have not forgotten him—the man I love." She runs to the senseless thing lying on the settee and talks to it, taking its hand and sobbing: "My Billy! I can't give you up!" Just here, chancing to notice Estrabon's eyes, an awful doubt comes to the tortured girl. Will even her sacrifice ransom those for whom she gives herself? She cries out, hoarsely: "If I keep my bargain, you keep yours—save every hair on the heads of those I love. You hear me—*save every hair!*"

For a strange tinge of fear is mixed with the ecstasy of Balasco's face. As he looks upon the big sleeping form of Indra's adored, he knows this man will not let him live to enjoy the beauty that his art has won. Even now he has planned: "After the wedding at that little chapel on the hill,

we come not back to this boat ; we journey safely to Havana. She will be at Cabañas when the holocaust commences. My dove will not know—she will not know!”

Noting his hesitancy, Indra whispers with threatening eyes : “ These lives for my hand, or you don’t get it ! ”

“ I—I promise.”

“ Swear it ! ”

“ I swear ; if you will be my wife truly. My own. To sit by my fireside ; to be the mother of my children—to *be my wife !* ”

“ Oh God ! ” shudders his victim, wringing her hands at his picture of domestic bliss.

“ Ah ! You did not mean it. It would have been ruse against ruse ! At the last there would have been no honeymoon for poor Balasco. Well ; have your will.” He turns away, then remarks, slowly, shading his eyes and pointing eastward : “ How quick that gunboat seems to be coming ! ”

Then Indra is under his hand again, and is begging him and praying him and saying : “ I will be your wife ! ”

“ My true wife ? ”

“ Your true wife.”

“ As you hope to see God ? ”

“ As I hope to save their lives ! Oh, Heaven and Earth ! Let us get to the priest quickly, so we can come back and save them *in time !* ”

“ Ah ! Now we are speaking to the point ! ” he says in strident tones. Then commands : “ Indra, step into the steward’s pantry, bathe your face, and put your hat on again. The bride must not look as if she had been crying. The priest

might think I had not treated you well! But you shall see—*Mi querida*—a kind husband—a loving husband—a *reigning* husband! You shall look upon me as your God, and have no other gods, or thy Balasco will be jealous—eh?” And he takes her delicate little ear in his fingers and pets her pale cheeks, till they blush crimson, and his eyes are very big, black and flashing, as he looks on the wondrous loveliness that is even now within his hand—to pet, to caress—to make his very own.

CHAPTER XIX.

“HUSH, MY BOY, YOU’LL FRIGHTEN WALL STREET.”

INTO this scene of despair and triumph comes the commonplace.

Mrs. Ormiston, stepping on deck, daintily arrayed, says, crossly: “Where is that lazy steward? He did not bring my coffee!” then looking around, suddenly cries: “Oh, what a lovely place! Where are we?”

“In Cuba,” replies the Don, “and you—you shall be the bridesmaid. My dear Mrs. Ormiston, this is my future wife. Miss Vanstone will make me happy within ten minutes!”

“Ten minutes?” screams the widow, and for one instant is angry. She would have married this man herself.

Then she sees Indra’s face and gasps—for she thinks she sees upon it death! Then, the affair

being explained, in very short words, to her, Amy suddenly begins to shriek and scream, falls on her knees, and frantically beseeches Don Estrabon to get her away quickly, sobbing: "I shall die if you keep me here—the gunboat!—the gunboat that is coming to murder us! Indra, be his before we are lost!"

Gazing at this, the girl, passing her hands through her hair, she is hastily arranging in a dazed, careless manner, jeers hoarsely: "Don't be afraid, Mrs. Ormiston, I have ransomed *you*—as well as the rest."

And the widow cries: "God bless you, you dear, brave thing!" then babbles: "The Don is very handsome, and when you tire, there are divorces in America."

To this Estrabon answers, savagely: "No divorce until after the honeymoon!" and looks at his coming bride, till the blushes are too heavy for her fair head, and she droops it.

"But these men, when they wake up, what will they do to you, naughty Balasco?" laughs Mrs. Ormiston, whom fear has made foolish.

"These men will *not* wake up! I will give them ten hours more sleep. Do you suppose I would let those great, big, burly fellows arise and see what I have done, and toss me about and throw poor Estrabon Balasco to the fishes?" laughs the Don, triumphantly. "Oh, no! Another hypodermic. They will still be sleeping, when we reach the Dry Tortugas, where I will put them on shore—the captain, the crew, everybody save my own men. Then a honeymoon in the Florida Keys, and then we return for papa's blessing. We are

both rich; it is a good match. You shall be happy, Indra, dear one! You will have for husband a man who loves you well enough to risk your hate to gain you."

And he gazes at the beauty that is before him, who is with trembling hands trying to pin her hat on her head for bridal festival. For in her despair the girl looks more glorious than she did in her joy of the day before; she has become more spiritual. Her eyes shine through their tears with a supernatural gleam. Every move of her exquisite figure indicates grace ethereal, despairing perhaps, but still beautiful as a Peri's agony when cast out of Paradise.

Looking at this, Balasco cries: "Juan! Pablo! Jump into the boat! The bride is coming!" and begins to hum the Wedding-March, in a crazy, Italian, foreign manner.

"Remember!" mutters Indra, and strides up to him to whisper in his ear: "If you want your bride to live—these men *live* also!"

"I will remember—when you are mine," he answers; then cries: "Hurry!" for even he now thinks it is time to move.

Juan and Pablo are in the boat.

"Let me assist you down, Mrs. Ormiston," murmurs Balasco, at the side-rail. "Let me assist you to the boat. And now, my bride—Indra—quick! The priest to make us one!"

His hand is extended to his prize, who comes faltering toward him, her sweet eyes full of hopeless agony, her fair limbs trembling with despair; but even as he seizes the delicate fingers, that shrink from his, Estrabon starts back!

A hoarse voice comes from the saloon, crying: "Two men in the boat! We've got him now, Varmint!" and from the door of the deck-house issue Mastic, his clothes covered with flour, and looking like a miller, and the Varmint, a mass of white, like a miller's boy; only, unlike miller and his boy, each carries a big navy revolver, cocked and ready for use.

"I arrest you. You are my prisoner!" cries the detective. "You, Don Balasco. I'm speaking to *you*! Let go that girl's hands! I'm going to manacle you." And he is producing handcuffs.

"Arrest me! Here, in Spain! For what?"

"For piracy!"

"These are not the high seas!"

"This vessel is in my charge. You stole it from me. I seized those arms last night. Surrender! Throw up your hands for the 'darbies'!"

"Manacled—before HER!" shrieks the Don, destroyed in the moment of his triumph. Then he utters a hideous cry, calls to his men, draws a stiletto, springs like a wildcat at the officer, and dies like any other vermin—shot through the head!

To his master's scream, Estrabon's steersman comes running out of the pilot-house, and the Varmint shoots him as he comes, but does not kill, only wounds him. Juan and Pablo in the boat would spring upon deck, but they are warned off with revolvers, and the wounded man is thrown down to them.

Then Mastic, picking up the body of Balasco, says: "He is dead. I think I will chuck the re-

mains of this bridegroom overboard. Miss Vanstone, I hope you won't have hard feelings agin me for having robbed you of a husband. Some girls do."

But this hideous joke is ill-timed. Indra Vanstone is in hysterics, begging them to put steam on; sobbing: "The Spanish gunboat is flying to butcher those I love!"

Mastic, taking this view also, exclaims: "By gosh! There's an engineer down in that hold. You can steer, Varmint! Catch hold of that wheel!"

"Try me!" cries the boy. "I'm working for my gizzard!" and is into the pilot-house just in time.

Even as the Varmint speaks, men are seen coming through the undergrowth near the beach; a moment after the sharp rat-a-tat-tat of *Mausers* is heard; and rifle balls, singing like insects, fly over or patter against the yacht.

Here suddenly Mastic shrieks: "By the Eternal, we're trapped!" For a great black smoke is coming round the point to the westward from Bahia Honda, and the gunboat from Muriel is now well past Cabañas.

The next instant the detective is hustling the ladies down the companionway, saying: "Get into the hold, below the water line!" and encouraging them with: "You'll be safe there. I'll be on deck to take care of you, or die doing it."

Then he springs into the engine-room, and clapping a revolver to the head of Balasco's affrighted negro engineer, says to him: "Turn on the steam! If that engine stops after it is moving; if it don't go fast as it can fly; if this boat don't

make fifteen knots an hour, your brains leave your body! You know me,—Tom Mastic."

The ducky, putting out affrighted hands, moves the valves, steam enters the cylinders, and the propeller commences to revolve.

"Look out!" cries the revenue man, shoving up the window connecting with the pilot-house. "Look out, Varmint! Steer straight out to sea! Don't give the coral reefs any chance to scrape the craft's bottom!"—then asks anxiously: "Are we going?"

"Yes; a little," says the boy; "but darned slowly."

"Get way onto her!" cries Mastic, turning on the engineer. "Get way on her! Put steam on her! Turn it into the boilers till ye blow 'em up! You darned fool, don't you know you're working for your own life? What will the Spaniards do, if they catch you? If you were old Weyler himself, they'd shoot you down and chop you into pieces, before you could tell them who you were! Get a move on you!"

This suggestion seems to have great effect upon the engineer, for the propeller commences to churn around, and the boat to jump through the water.

Suddenly the man mutters: "*Caramba!* Who will fire the furnaces?"

"I'll do it, for my life," says Mastic, and he passes up his revolver to the Varmint in the pilot-house, commanding: "Mark him! If he moves from his engines, or if they slow down, blow out his brains. I can't attend to him; I'm fireman now."

Then bringing all his brawny muscles into play the detective shovels coal into the furnaces, fortunately finding the near-by bunkers full.

Every now and then the revenue officer pauses, and, looking up at the Varmint, who is handling the wheel above, asks: "How do we move?"

"Prime!" answers the boy. "We're scooting."

"Have we left the bay?"

"Yes."

"Are we beyond the boundary reef?"

"I think so." Then the lad suddenly cries out: "Two gunboats! One to port, one to starb'd."

"Jumping snakes! How far off?"

"The starb'd one, three miles; on the port, a little less than two. But they're comin'."

"Are they farther out than we?"

"Yes; half a mile."

"Let her go. I guess we'll dodge them safe enough!"

Three minutes after, the boy speaks down into the engine-room and says: "The gunboat to west'rd looks as if she's goin' to fire."

"I can't help it. Let her blaze!"

And, as if in answer to Mastic's suggestion, a shot comes whistling through the air over their heads.

This has a great effect upon the negro engineer, who has ducked to the shot. He now rises to urge his engines, and the boat, trembling in her frame, plunges through the water, which fortunately is very calm, thus aiding the smaller vessel.

"We've got 'em behind us!" cries the Varmint, as another shot flashes just astern.

"Then keep 'em there! Stay! I'll jump on

deck. We must be near the three-mile limit now!" and Mastic springs up. For he no longer fears the negro engineer, being satisfied that worthy thinks his life will not be safe under the guns of the Spaniards.

Then the detective commences to curse, saying: "Darn it! We're outside the three-mile limit, and yet they're peppering away at us. We're on the high seas!" and, looking at the ensign of his country, mutters: "You don't seem to be much good anywhere! Spain peppers you wherever she sees you. The Stars and Stripes are like a red rag to that Spanish bull. Our only chance is to drive her—drive her!"

And drive her they do—straight on, into the open Florida Straits!

The *Flying Fish* is now making fourteen knots and leaving the Spanish gunboats slowly and surely astern of her. The shot of the one from Bahia Honda is falling short. The gunboat from Muriel has never even been within good range.

Then Mastic suddenly steps into the pilot-house, and whispers, pointing ahead: "Do you see that smoke away down on the horizon? If she's another Spanish gunboat——" and consulting the compass, he commands: "Steer nor' nor' east! That, with the drift of the Gulf Stream, will take us near Key West. Only keep yer eye peeled to see if that fellow with the black smoke to the north of us tries to head us off."

But here both the Varmint and Mastic start. A deep bass voice from behind them roars in their ears: "You boy and black devil there, what are you doing with my craft?"

It comes from Captain Thomas, who is just now awakening from his opium sleep.

"That's all right, Cap'," says the detective. "You know me. Wake up gradual, and I'll tell you all about it."

This he does, and by the time the bluff sea-dog has thoroughly got command of his senses, Thomas is cursing Estrabon up hill and down hill. Getting to the wheel, he says: "Hand those spokes over! You go down and pass coal. Tell that engineer if he don't do his duty I'll kill him from the pilot-house. As for you, Mr. Mastic, perhaps you'd better go down, put the ladies out of their fright, and bring them on deck again. The Spaniards have quit firing—only——" Here he guffaws horribly: "You're not exactly the chap to do the polite."

For Mastic, first covered by flour, as he broke out of his stateroom, and then powdered over with coal dust as he has toiled in the bunkers, is a picture in black and white that would defy even caricature.

"Oh, ain't I a beauty?" laughs the detective, grinning in a mirror. "You see, the Varmint and I had to cut our way out of that stateroom. Say, what a whittler that boy is! He chopped up that panel with his jack-knife in precious little time, and then we had to cut every sack of that flour open and shake the stuff out of them; because we couldn't move 'em, and couldn't get our hands far enough out to lift them. Why, your cabin and the mate's and Frenchy's pantry look as if they'd been mixed up in a cyclone with a Minnesota flour mill."

"All right," says the captain, grimly. "Get the

ladies on deck, and see if you can't rouse up some of of them lazy beggars of the crew. Draw water and swash it over 'em. You'd better do that first; it's more important."

This Mastic does, aided by the Varmint, when he can get time from the duties of the stoke-room. Under pails of sea-water, the *Flying Fishes* begin to regain their senses. Sandy, the engineer, is aroused in the engine-room. The two deck-hands and coal-passers commence to discover that they have something else to do but sleep, for the captain's voice is calling them: "Lazy beggars!" "Sleep-heads!" and he is making other nautical but pertinent allusions to their slumbers under the cigars and hypodermics of Balasco.

The Spanish gunboats, hull down upon the horizon, have given up the chase, as Mrs. Ormiston comes on deck, and says: "Miss Vanstone will not be up immediately," then utters, almost as if affrighted: "Why, you're awake at last!"

For the gentlemen in the saloon are now out of the power of morphine, and have been listening to the detective's story in a dazed, uncertain way. As their senses come gradually back to them, Blakely remarks, astoundedly: "By Jove! This is a wondrous story!" Then suddenly adds: "I—I recollect now. I believe I was half conscious when that infernal scoundrel jabbed me with his hypodermic syringe." Pulling up his shirt sleeve, he finds a wound, the others do the same, and something is explained to them that Mastic has not elucidated.

"That's how we slept so long. Don Aqua Tofana gave us a double dose," remarks Rex,

savagely; then cries: "Oh, Lord, how hungry I am," adding nervously, "I hope the Spanish poisoner has not killed poor Frenchy, the cook."

Here Severance asks, suddenly: "You say he did this to force Indra to marry him?"

"Sartin!" answers the detective. "Hasn't he been loving her for a long time? Didn't the Don have her picture before he'd ever seen her?" With this he tells them the curious story of the photograph at Key West.

"And you killed him?" mutters our Billy.

"Dead as a doornail!"

"Then I am sorry for it!" Severance remarks, slowly, and astonishes the Custom-house man, who has expected to be thanked. "Yes; and I'm not grateful for it at all! By Heaven! I'd have liked to have seen Don Estrabon Balasco—just a few minutes before he died."

A moment after he leads the detective aside, and asks, chewing his mustache nervously: "She was going to marry him to save our lives?"

"I—I think she was."

But Mastic has no time to say more, for Severance is down in the ladies' cabin and is rapping on her stateroom door, and crying: "Indra, my loved one! Indra!"

To his voice the girl answers: "Thank God! Awake! Oh, Billy!" As her door opens, his arms go round her, and she looks at him as if he were arisen from the dead.

Then seeing in her sweet face things that had not been there before, Severance mutters: "My God! How much you must have suffered!" and begins to swear and rave, and would call down

curses on Balasco, did not her white fingers close his lips. Finally, gazing at his betrothed rather curiously, he asks: "You would have married him, to save my life?"

"Yes."

"Good Heavens! He had just as well have killed me!"

"I feared you would grieve for me, Billy, but I hoped you would forget me. I knew I could never be the same to you; that no divorce could make me the Indra you had loved. But there was Rex! I thought of my father's gray hairs going down in sorrow at the loss of his only son. I thought of Gertie, who loved the young Cuban who would have been butchered with you. Then there was good old Captain Thomas and the crew. Besides, Estrabon would have had no triumph over me; you need never have been jealous of him, Billy. I should have died after I had saved you—this evening; after he had put you all on shore, safe, in the United States. But he is dead," says the girl, dreamily, "and I live, and you live—and he never kissed me!"

Then, noting something on the face of her sweetheart, Indra suddenly murmurs: "What! Jealous of the dead?"

"No, no!" mutters Severance. "Only I didn't know quite until now how much I—I really loved you."

"Nor I you! till I bid you farewell as you lay senseless, and I heard him humming the Wedding-March! Oh, mercy! I hear him now—and then the smoke of the gunboat coming to slaughter—and then he cried: 'Put out the fire!' and struck

my heart! my heart! Billy, oh heaven! how my heart has wept to-day!—Shall I ever forget?" And she is in his arms, and her fair head is on his shoulder, sobbing as if her spirit would leave her body.

Six hours after this, just about evening, the *Flying Fish* runs up to the wharf at Emerald Key, and is boarded by Mr. Vanstone, who has anxious eyes, and Gertie, who has run down ahead of her father's less agile footsteps. After them come little Vortex, Ethel Rivers and Flora Woodbridge, and there is more to tell them than they ever dreamed—this strange, curious story of Spanish love and death; to hear of which makes Mr. Vanstone's face grow white, and Gertie gaze affrightedly at Ramon, and little Vortex think he would like to go North immediately.

* * * * *

It is not until a day or two after, that they can discuss the affair calmly.

But they do this one hot morning, in the presence of Mr. Mastic and the Varmint, both of whom have been summoned from Key West; the detective bringing with him an extra published in a newspaper of that day, containing a dispatch from Havana, which reads:

"The defeat of another filibustering expedition. Glorious gallantry of Captains Burriel and Santiago, of the Spanish gunboats *Fernando Segundo* and *Infanta Maria*.

"These officers, with their gallant crews, assisted by a company of Rodriguez's guerrillas, attacked a large vessel loaded with men and armed with cannon, and after a most desperate combat, drove them away, probably sinking the ship—as she has not been seen or reported since the fight. The filibusters lost forty killed, among them the Cuban, Don Estrabon Ba-

lasco, who has been the leader of the Key West rebels, and a thorn in the side of Weyler and of Spain. His body, together with those of three more insurgents, of names unknown, but one of them having an enormous ear, has been brought to Havana, and a *fête* is now in progress over the victory. The captains of the Spanish gunboats will receive medals, and probably promotion. Rodriguez, the captain of the guerrillas, will be advanced to a majority. On the Spanish side there were no casualties, their attack was so dashing and irresistible."

Over this extraordinary bit of news the detective has been chuckling ever since he left Key West.

"By gum! Do you know those Cubans in his tobacco factory are going to have a mortuary procession in honor of Balasco, the patriot?" he guffaws to the party on the veranda at Emerald Key.

But the others do not laugh.

The traces of that morning in the tropics still linger on Indra's fair brow, though they are disappearing under the hands of Cupid. She sits and looks at "Our Billy" as if she were hardly sure of him now, though the flowers and cocoanut trees of her own garden perfume the air about her, and the *Flying Fish* rests lightly on the waters at her anchorage and looks as much the pleasure vessel as if Spanish bullets had not pattered on her sides and Spanish shell gone screaming over her.

The click of balls from the billiard-room, where little Vortex and Rex are playing, comes merrily to her. Her father's voice is in her ears, and Gertie has got one of her hands and is petting it. The family are going north in a day or two—*then* she will forget.

"Mr. Mastic," remarks Severance, "I have something to say to you. 'Varmint, here's a check for you!'"

"What's that?" asks the boy, looking dubi-

ously at the piece of paper the gentleman extends to him.

"It's more money than you ever had or dreamt of having, in your life."

"Crackie! I don't want that! I war only working for my own blessed skin," says the Varmint, "and just a little for her. She'd been kind ter me."

"And I don't see as I need anything, just for saving my own life," says the Government man, for Mr. Vanstone is proffering him something.

"You will not take anything?"

"Well, I don't exactly say that! If you've got one of those boxes of *Regalias Imperiales*—Estrabon sent you five hundred of 'em—I think I might be persuaded."

"Take all I have!" cries Vanstone. "Their smoke nauseates me!"

"They don't me!" guffaws Mastic, as he takes his departure, and with him the Varmint, both puffing a *Regalia Imperial*, to row back to the *Gopher*.

From this interview Mr. Vanstone leads the young Cuban, whispering "Lieutenant Varona, a word with you. You are going back to Cuba?"

"Of course! I must do my duty."

"You have another duty besides fighting, even for your country."

"What is that?"

"Living for those who love you! I take this liberty, my boy, because my little daughter Gertrude, who nursed you to life, somehow thinks your life belongs to her."

"And it does!" cries the young man. "But under the circumstances it would not have been

honorable for me to speak. If I come back alive from the trouble and death of my unhappy island I shall tell her that I have been always her slave and adorer." Then Ramon, with the excited gesticulation of the tropics, murmurs: "She will be very beautiful. If I live——"

"Yes; I would not wish to marry her immediately," says the elder man. "But if you went away from her, Gertie's life would not be happy. Every breath, every telegram from the island would be an anxiety, a menace to her. She knows the Spaniards take no prisoners. She knows a wound and capture means either death on the field or execution in the Cabañas. She knows it is not war, but massacre, that is taking place over there. You yourself have said that it was not men that Cuba needed, but arms. Would not this—I am rich; don't shrink back—contribution to your cause, to buy munitions for *Cuba Libre*, be of more aid than your own individual services? Take your choice. Do what you think will aid your island most. Present this to the Cuban Junta, or yourself."

"The money will aid my country most, I am sorry to say," remarks the young man.

"Very well. I think a year or two of quiet up North will do you good. I'll get a position for you in a bank," says the American with business promptitude. "The thing is settled!" then mutters, "God bless you! You have taken a weight off my mind. You had better tell Gertie you are not going. The child is getting thin."

"For me?" ejaculates Varona, with joyous eyes.

And he goes off hastily through the beautiful

garden to find Miss Gertie sitting under a coconut tree.

Coming into the parlor from his interview, Mr. Vanstone remarks to a question from Blakely: "Yes, we are all going north. I want to get away from this place. Here we are too close to the fire that is burning up that island."

"Some day," replies the young man, "we will have to put it out! It is too near for us to let it burn!

"It is a curious fact," Vanstone observes, "that of all the Americans who have been done to death in Cuba, not one life has been atoned for. Of course I am not speaking of those of our citizens who go to fight the Spaniard. They battle with a cruel people and must accept the chances of barbarous war. But the innocent ones, those whom the very contiguity of the island has thrown into Spanish clutches; the consumptive boy ordered from Massachusetts to a warmer climate, by his doctors, twenty odd years ago; the captives of the *Virginus*, taken on the high seas in violation of all international law; Speakman of Indiana, Wyeth of New York, and half a hundred others, butchered in defiance of our consuls' protests. For none of these murders has Spain made such explanation or expiation as would have been accepted by any other first-class power upon this earth! They kill us! We protest! They apologize—and kill again!"

"Yet we are not a coward people; we've done some fighting in our day!" mutters the Bostonian.

"Yes, and will do it again!" cries Rex, who has

just come in from billiards. "Some day or other the people will take the bit in their teeth, American diplomacy will go kiting, and——"

"Hush, my boy!" says his father, with the shiver of the financier. "You'll frighten Wall street."

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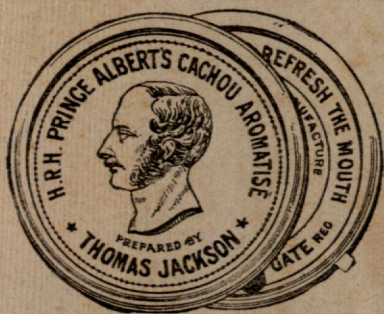
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