

BAD HOMBRE

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By—

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DEDICATED

To

All Comrades

of

The Globe and Anchor

The United States Marines

FOREWORD

On July 18, 1924, General Horacio Vásquez took oath of office as de facto president of the Dominican Republic, and with his inauguration, the dark skinned natives, wild with joy and singing their patriotic hymns, became a free and democratic people.

On the same day at Fort Ozama, that grim, old fortress guarding the approach from the Carribean Sea, another historic scene was enacted.

As rigid, khaki clad ranks of American marines and native troops stood in the compound at "present arms," the Stars and Stripes slowly descended from the flagstaff high over the white watch-tower.

With the last strains of the American anthem floating away in the torrid air, more rapidly the Dominican colors (squares of blue and red with dividing white cross) ascended the flagstaff and replaced Old Glory. Thus, Santo Domingo, long under American military control, became the — Republica Dominicana.

Great praise should be accorded the United States Marine Corps, for its work in setting to rights the badly disordered house of Dominicana; another glowing record with "Semper Fidelis" appended thereto.

A decree from Washington ordered the withdrawal of the marines, but with the departure of the last transport, the newly found republic suffered a great thorn in its side, to which the efforts in plucking out furnish the incentive for this novel.

W. WENDELL FLEWELLING.

Guantanamo Bay,
December, 1924.

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CHAPTER I

The Clyde liner Algonquin steamed slowly into the open harbor of Santo Domingo City, and heaving to, dropped anchor under the grim shadow of old Fort Ozama.

The precipitous splash of anchor and rattle of chain disturbed the morning silence, seeming to bring to this quaintly secluded port, a turbulent greeting from the outside world. The harbor was bare of craft, save for the few, narrow little dug-outs moored along the banks of the Rio Ozama near its mouth, where dirty, straw colored water emptied into the cleaner green of the Carribean.

Though sleek in a new coat of paint, the Algonquin wallowed like a water-logged barrel in the great ground swells that rolled and dashed with engulfing madness against the ledge of gray coral bordering the low coast.

On this, her third passage of the season, the Algonquin's register boasted but a half page of passengers, and only three of these had reached their destination with her arrival in Santo Domingo.

Señor J. Fernandez de Gabriels, Spanish chargé d' affaires, was returning to duty after a three months' sojourn in his native Seville, while the pretty Señorita Juanita Canelon, accompanied by her sedate Aunt Señora Combasa, was mission-bent to the bedside of her critically sick father in the little town of Boca Chica. The three had been close companions during the entire voyage from Cadiz, and scarcely lost sight

of each other from Le Havre to Southampton, and thence across the Atlantic to New York. The many port changes had been nerve-racking, and foreigners, incommensurable surroundings, and rough seas was a bewildering experience to Juanita Canelon. De Gabriels however had been a bulwark of advice and comfort to his charming companions, both cheerful and entertaining. But unlike the consul, quite content after his trip home, and eager to settle down to his leisurely duties, Juanita experienced no great feeling of enthusiasm upon reaching the little West Indies port.

A sudden cablegram tersely enlightening, and signed by a Captain Philip Kent, had told of the severe illness of her father, and because recovery was doubtful, it was imperative that she come to him.

Fresh from her garden in old Madrid, she answered the call; and so sudden was the turn in affairs, that she was half way across the English Channel before she realized the great length of the journey before her. A new world spread out before her, but being a sensible little person she confined herself to the inevitable. However, it was due to the companionship of dear Aunt Combasa, and the kind offices of the interesting De Gabriels that made the voyage anything approaching enjoyment.

Eighteen and beautiful, Juanita was as unsophisticated and ignorant of the world as most European girls are, but she was possessed of an unusually alert and mature mind, with a natural gift of appraising people which amazed the sedate Aunt Combasa. She had astonished her teacher of English with her facility and accuracy in that tongue, and received many reprimands when caught reading books on American life during study periods. This did not prove that she was disloyal to her beloved Spain—she would prove that to the world. She was merely attracted to the Americans, their ideals, and their glowing record of courage and honor. And when she

beheld the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, she experienced the only thrill during the voyage. She was impelled with a great desire to feel in reality the pulsating life of these millions of progressive people.

But now she had reached her destination; a wretched little country with its relentless sun, fever, and horrid insects! How could she learn to like the place when it had torn her away from beloved Spain? Already she loathed it, for it had left its mark on her father, threatening to exterminate him! Had she come too late; had the dreaded fever claimed her only parent? The cablegram had been a severe shock, yet she had not felt its import fully until the journey had passed and she now beheld the country in which her father might even now be dying.

And so Señor De Gabriels, promenading the length of the first deck found the young woman standing close to the port rail, gazing shoreward in pensive attitude.

His cheerful greeting startled her, yet she turned to him smiling as though pleased by the interruption.

"It is a drab outlook, is it not Señorita?" he asked; his voice that of a man of culture.

Juanita gazed up thoughtfully into his handsome, bronzed face.

"You read my thoughts correctly, Señor. . . . Yes, to me it is all that—abhorrent if you will! . . . I could never accustom myself to such a change."

"But the climate is not extremely severe," he replied quickly, removing his arm from the rail and half turning toward her. "In fact, it is not appreciably different from that of southern Spain. . . . Cierito — living conditions are deplorable, and one must be careful of one's health, for sanitation is positively hopeless. . . . Typhoid, malaria, and dengue claim many natives, but I contend that despite unsavory conditions here, you will not tarry very long after your mission

is fulfilled. The reward of returning to our beloved country at your leisure is something to anticipate — is it not?"

He watched her intently. The beauty of the girl had captivated him en voyage, and her voice, clear and musical enthralled him as much as her beauty.

Under a broad rimmed pink silk hat, Juanita's great, dark eyes gazed up at the consul with a doubtful expression.

"I do not know, Señor. . . . My anticipation for the present is to find Padre entirely out of danger. . . . God willing! Should he recover, I shall remain long enough in San Domingo to prevail upon him to return to Spain with me. . . . Should he refuse, I see no other prospect than to remain by his side to watch over him.

"You know, his livelihood is here. It is the success of the plantation that kept me at convent, and made Aunt Combasa so comfortable in Madrid. In a way, I feel quite small and selfish disparaging a country that has made the Canelons financially secure." She turned her head slightly to watch an official-looking motor launch headed out of the mouth of the Rio Ozama, and sputtering on in the direction of the Algonquin.

When she turned to the consul again, a tear glistened on her rounded cheek and she sighed deeply.

"But should he die—Santa Maria forbid! It will prove an eternity before I again set foot in our country!"

De Gabriels experienced a sensation of delight as he weighed her words; deciding immediately that it would indeed be a wonderful blessing if her father did recover and refuse to return to Spain. Close association with such an attractive being as Juanita Canelon, in such a country as San Domingo would be a fanciful experience. Loneliness would prove to be an open sesame to her heart. But his moment of sudden reflection was dispelled by her question as she pointed in the

direction of a ship, a wreck stranded on the rocks close to the shore.

"Tell me, Señor De Gabriels, sirvase—what ship is that stranded on the shore?"

De Gabriels did not look in the direction indicated, apparently knowing what had attracted her attention.

"It is the wreck of the Americano warship 'Memphis'," he answered readily. "She met with disaster in 1916, the year that a terrible typhoon struck the West Indies. She was lifted like a toy and thrown on that submerged ledge of coral. . . . It occurred about three months before my first arrival here, and she has not budged from her position since. Several unfortunate souls were lost in vain attempts to gain the shore, but the rest of the crew remained aboard until finally with the abatement of the storm a safe rescue was effected."

Juanita's interest was aroused as she gazed from stem to stern of the rustic old fighting ship of former days, and for a space she forgot the intense heat and her depressed thoughts.

"It seems so unfortunate," she remarked with casual concern, "so unnecessary, that a few of the brave Americano sailors should lose their lives so close to land—and yet, how noble their death sacrificing themselves for others. . . . That was a great gesture, Señor, magnificent!" She paused, eyes steadfastly fixed on the forward fighting top of the warship, looking not unlike a great cross, securely in place; a fitting monument to its deceased warriors. Her eyelids flickered, great lashes fanning each other, and then she sighed.

"Do you know, Señor—I love the Americanos!" Her words were firmly spoken, holding a trace of the emotional in their resonance.

De Gabriel's fine face exhibited surprise, and he bent down, searching her face. But the sincerity he read in those soulful eyes corrected his evident incredulity. There was a naiveté about her in the poise of her shapely head, the tilt of rounded

chin, and pretty elevation of the nose which he silently admired.

"You have met many Americanos, Señorita?" he asked, which to Juanita sounded like an invitation to debate.

Her gaze did not shift from the Memphis.

"No, Señor—unfortunately no; but I have read so much about them—their work, their aims, and the good they have done in this world; especially for the smaller, helpless nations. . . . And do you know—when my cousin Rafael paid us a visit from New York, I noticed particularly how splendidly changed he was—so resolute, so democratic, but best of all, so full of fun. . . . This alone was convincing evidence of an advanced knowledge instilled in the minds of a people who are now the criterions for the Old World. It was such culture Señor, that was triumphantly superior to another Kultur in the Great War."

Juanita's eyes now wandered away from the Memphis to the tops of palm trees arrayed majestically at one end of the shore, their broad, bending sheaves waving to her as though in greeting.

"The Americanos are truly a wonderful people," offered De Gabriels, watching the light breeze playing with a curl of her glossy jet hair. "I admire them chiefly for their pleasant personalities, yet their mercenary ambitions consume them, and they would fain gloat over a financial conquest. . . . To me, that is their principal failing—all for their mighty dollar!"

Juanita turned toward him almost abruptly. There was a resoluteness to her chin that was decidedly pronounced.

"And yet," she answered, "if that be true, it is in itself no evil characteristic Señor. Money is a necessary asset to living, and the peoples of the entire universe are ever seeking wealth. . . . You must admit, amigo benévolo, that whatever the United States possesses, she never gained unfairly, which is hardly true of most nations, our own country included."

De Gabriel's face showed displeasure.

"Why, Señorita Canelon! I believe you are the most unpatriotic little person in all Spain!"

Juanita's dark eyes flashed.

"Oh, no Señor! . . . God save our noble land! . . . I enjoy a broader scope than most of our countrymen, whom it seems will never forget the war of 1898. . . . I have, but I am afraid you have not—so there!"

Further discussion of the ways of the Americans was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the steward, who announced in a perfunctory manner that the customs officials had come aboard and were waiting to examine luggage.

De Gabriels, somewhat piqued over the girl's candor availed himself of the interruption and proposed caring for all the luggage. And although Juanita protested, she was quietly overruled, and the consul with a forced laugh of victory, but with a silent vow never to talk again to her of things American, strode off down the deck.

A few minutes later he could be plainly seen aft the port gangway in the midst of a scattered collection of trunks and suitcases, with a bevy of back, ferret-like searching officials in khaki uniforms grouped about him.

Aunt Señora Combasa was very much in evidence also, standing outside the door of her cabin; a tall, stately looking woman past middle age, expostulating with a rotund little Dominican, who exhibited little care in his search of an open trunk between them.

Juanita felt no desire to join her aunt, nor did she smile over the vexed expression on her elderly relation's face. Why she failed to seek shelter from the boiling sun proved that she wanted to be alone with her thoughts. In company with the consul she had enjoyed the conversation, although she regretted the misunderstanding in the finale. But now as she leaned heavily against the rail, a picture framed itself in her mind; that of a gray haired, fever stricken father, lying in a

state of collapse. She became nervous as the picture faded just over the high watch-tower of Fort Ozama. Minutes passed and her nervousness increased with the realization that every little delay minimized her chance to hear her father's voice again after years of separation before his possible death.

The suspense gripped her. In distraction, she turned away from the rail and paced back and forth a short distance along the deck.

A half hour elapsed, indicated by the striking of the ship's bell. To her it was an eternity, for still those dusky representatives of a new republic continued to paw over the passengers' belongings.

She ceased her pacing at length, and returned to the rail. Her misty eyes engaged the long jetty extending out from the mouth of the river directly opposite the fort, where the running surf careened in full length, breaking into smoky jets of foam. From atop the watch-tower, and unfurled to the light breeze, fluttered the colors of the republic, four squares of blue and red, while the chalky whiteness of the fort against a background of low, dirty buildings of adobe stood out distinctly, proving the only outstanding feature along the water front. The capital itself looked very miniature, toy-like because of the lowness of the coast, and the narrow mouth of the river seemed hardly the width of a hundred yards. Along the jetty, palm trees, tall and stately, reared their graceful lines to the clear, azure sky, and their broad sheaves swayed with the caressing breeze like the plumed hats of sentinels.

Juanita caught a faint glimpse of the long dock on the west bank of the river, where two, light draught steamers were discharging their cargoes.

Then if Padre lived and refused to return to Spain, this indeed was to be her future home; probably never again to hear the pleasant clicking of castanets of the dancers of gay Madrid!

Sighing in apparent abandon, she turned away once more from the rail, and as she wiped away the tear stains from her cheeks with a diminutive square of lace, she looked into the smiling face of her Aunt Combasa.

"Come, niña bonita!" greeted the one time lady-in-waiting of a princess of Spain, her voice low and tender. "The steward's gong has sounded, and we leave this wretched ship immediately after luncheon."

"But the luggage! . . . And where is the Señor De Gabriels, Tia?" cried Juanita, looking furtively down the deck, to discover with a glow of satisfaction all the luggage piled neatly near the gangway with only one native standing guard over it.

Aunt Combasa laughed merrily. Nature had smiled benevolently upon her, making her half century of years a deceiving enigma. A black lace mantilla covered her head and shoulders, draped from the broad, concha comb, lending to her a touch of austerity. But the laughter evoked by her niece's bewildered gaze, proved the true side of a sunny disposition.

"El Señor will join us at luncheon, and the kind caballero has not only suggested caring for our vise papers, but has placed the consulate car and chauffeur at our disposal to take us to Boca Chica. . . . As for the luggage—those black little diablos are through stamping all over it!"

"Oh, Tia Combasa!" exclaimed Juanita relievingly. "I am so glad—the suspense was unbearable!"

Without another word, Aunt Combasa linked her arm with that of her niece, and the two ladies from far away Spain went below.

CHAPTER II

The recent rescue from death of Señor Reynaldo Canelon, respected citizen and manager-general of the San Pedro Sugar plantation, was still the subject of much debate in La Capital.

Wounded, fever stricken, and verging to the point of starvation, he had been found after a month of hopeless search in the Crystal Caves, southwest of San Isidro.

The name of the bad hombre, Ramon Natera was on the lips of the entire populace. To the little black children it was synonymous with hobgoblin, and to their adults a threatening machete of destruction. But although "Listin Diario" had published the account of the notorious bandit leader's new exploit of kidnapping Señor Canelon, no mention had been made of the one responsible for his timely rescue.

Who indeed had spoiled the plans of the diablo Natera, sending him and his bandoleros fleeing for safety to their mountain lair north of Seibo? The native constabulary—El Policia Nacional, alone could not have accomplished it—they were a blundering lot of fools! . . . Had the days of the terrible, Vicentico returned, and must the dreaded Americano marines be recalled?

The incident and its subsequent results continued to furnish plenty of interest. In the parks at night, and in the cane fields and places of business, the names of Señor Canelon and Ramon Natera were entirely the subjects of argument, even above the outcome of the weekly lottery and the lure of a delightful siesta during the heat of afternoon.

* * *

On the afternoon of the day that the steamship Algonquin

arrived in Santo Domingo, two men sat in earnest conversation in the living room of the Casa Alhaja, the white stucco home of Señor Reynaldo Canelon, overlooking a crescent of sandy beach in the seaside town of Boca Chica.

Señor Canelon reclined against a heap of pillows on a low divan placed near the big open window, where a view of the broad Carribean glistened green and white through a grove of royal palms in the rays of the afternoon sun. He was beyond middle age with an iron-gray imperial, masking a thin, drawn, and sickly face. A dark dressing robe covered his lean frame which accentuated the pallor of his skin. He smiled weakly at the tall, strongly built American seated directly facing him. His vis-a-vis filled out the spotless white flannels he wore, and his good looking, almost boyish face, bronzed by the tropic sun returned the smile whole heartedly.

"And you say that Natera and his bandoleros disappeared entirely, Capitán?"

Philip Kent, intelligence operative of the Policia Nacional leaned forward and nodded his curly brown head vigorously.

"Si, Señor. . . . Vanished like lizards into the cajuillas bush! . . . The chase led from the hills above Seibo, deep into the fastness of Los Cordilleras, but we returned empty handed. . . . This is the third time that he has evaded us, proving that the tricky hombre has a hidden lair somewhere in the mountains, and it will require much time and secret investigation to locate him. . . . You know Señor, his friends are countless and he has a legion of followers.

"My assistant, the Sargento Linell has been operating north of Marcoris, and he finds that the natives are much in sympathy with Natera. Why, next door neighbors view each other with suspicion, not knowing who is in the pay of the bandolero! . . . It is hard, I tell you, to obtain the results desired, for all natives are enemies to the constabulary it seems,

and although the Secretary wants to coöperate, he is apparently handicapped by red tape.

"But there! Natera is trouble enough without recounting my difficulties. . . . I have brought you some good news! . . . The steamship Algonquin arrived in the harbor this morning, and it is quite probable that your daughter is aboard."

Señor Canelon's gray eyes brightened with enthusiasm.

"Capitán—do you think she has had time to make the third passage of the Algonquin?"

But before Philip Kent could make reply, a female voice highly excited answered the question from the broad doorway across the room.

"Si, padre! And praise to the good Father I have not been too late!"

Both men looked in the direction of the voice, and Señor Canelon beholding his daughter Juanita poised where she stood, arms extended and love radiant through the mist in her eyes, cried out in recognition—

"Juanita! Juanita niña! . . . Is it really you?"

"Padre—mi padre!"

A short run from the doorway and Juanita dropped by his side. She encircled his neck with eager arms and kissed him fervently on brow and cheek.

Philip Kent was deeply impressed by the scene and he proceeded to leave the room. But he had moved only a few steps when he was detained by the low pitched voice of Señor Canelon.

"Stay, amigo—this is the happiest moment of my life!"

Juanita released her father, experiencing a touch of embarrassment in the presence of this tall, good looking stranger, but she accepted the chair he had drawn up with thanks.

She seized the opportunity to appraise him before he re-seated himself. She could not but admire his frank, youthful

face, noting the firm, strong chin; and never in all her life had she seen such dancing blue eyes. And because Philip Kent returned her gaze unflinchingly, she lowered her eyes to the straw matting on the floor to deflect her attempt at scrutiny.

The face of Señor Canelon had taken on considerable color and his gray eyes shone. He took instant note of the situation.

"Ahi! (there) What an ass I am! . . . Juanita, this gentleman is the Capitán Felipe Kent, from Americana—to whom your father owes his life. . . . Felipe—my only daughter, Juanita."

Kent arose again, and standing his full height bowed graciously. He noted an almost devout tribute in the great, dark orbs of the girl as she gave him her hand. Such a close perspective of this vision of beauty from far off Madrid, literally swept him off his feet. The touch of her hand was like brushing something silken, although it was a firm little hand, its clasp warm and real. And her voice—such music! A very faint lisp enhanced her pronunciation of his name.

"Señor Kent. Since leaving dear Madrid, my very soul has been tortured with thoughts of papa's probable death, but to my joyful surprise I find him very much alive, although looking none too well. . . . He is hardly lying on a death bed, but through the grace of God, he is sitting up talking with his best friend. Doubtlessly, he has been joking with you about my expected long journey from Cadiz; a wild goose chase—so to speak, to the accompaniment of that horrid sea-sickness!" She raised her rounded shoulders slightly, deprecatingly.

"I am overwhelmed, not only to find him safe and so jocosos, but with the pleasure of holding the hand of you muy Señor, his savior and friend! . . . And yet, is it not fair that I should be enlightened as to the circumstances attending this unexpected surprise?"

Kent, amused by the fascinating gestures, acquiesced immediately, with a seriousness matching her own.

"I firmly agree with you Señorita," he said quietly, "but my Spanish is so utterly impossible, I might suggest that your father tell of his affair with one, Ramon Natera, providing the ordeal of your long journey has not taxed your patience and endurance?"

Smiling to the girl, and then shooting a quizzical glance to Señor Canelon, he sat down. He knew that he appeared ridiculous to her, staring back into her beautiful face and dodging the issue.

Juanita told herself that his Spanish was not impossible, and she suffered not the least embarrassment now under his close study. It was daring, but his eyes were so clear, unafraid, and pleasing! As for fatigue resulting from her journey, she and Aunt Combasa had thoroughly enjoyed the motor ride from La Capital, passing through interesting little towns, and viewing the vast seas of sugar cane. Avoiding his eyes, she turned to her father.

"Come papa—do tell me the story?" And smiling slyly, added, "The Capitán Kent's excuse is a poor one, so proceed?"

But at that moment another voice from the doorway brought an interruption, and Aunt Señora Combasa walked majestically into the room.

"Dear brother Reynaldo, how glad I am to see you again, and may Dios be praised—you are alive; thin and sickly, yet much alive!"

Brother and sister embraced, and following the introductions, Kent discovered that the worthy Aunt Combasa told him the truth in her eyes, as did her niece, that another Canelon claimed him as a friend.

"Perhaps I have interrupted a story," said Aunt Combasa, accepting the chair which Kent relinquished to her, "but while your very useful Maria is unpacking our things, Reynaldo, please go on with it. . . . My interest is aroused because of the presence of this handsome Americano!"

"But Maria does not know where to place your things hermana," interposed her brother, reaching out for the small, silver bell near his side on a low ebony stand flanked by bottles of medicine.

"Do not ring for her, Reynaldo; she is putting our things in the east room of course. . . . Cierito! Did you not make your letters tiresome with so much description of the Casa Alhaja?"

Juanita looked up quickly, to meet the indulgent gleam in the eyes of Philip Kent. It was strangely unfathomable now, yet she surrendered to it perforce, a flush of rose deepening the pink in her cheeks. She was amazed that she challenged him, gazing into that depth of blue. It was no casual attraction this, for she suffered no confusion; Greater potentialities?

In silent condescension he told her across the short, intervening space that she was beautiful, and she with audacity rewarded him with a dimpled smile. It was hardly acknowledgment, but the eternal feminine was manifest. A second later she chided herself for it, but admitted without danger of retraction that this straightforward Americano appealed to her with an attraction never before experienced. He was more than handsome—forceful, yet reticent; he was her father's friend—his savior!

The voice of Señor Canelon drew their attention.

"And now because El Capitán has placed a burden upon me, I shall tell you how Ramon Natera, the bad one, held me captive for almost an entire month."

Juanita and Aunt Combasa sat erect in their chairs and waited with interest.

"Before the Americano marines quit Dominicana," commenced Señor Canelon, "I won a case against this Ramon Natera in the Court of Appeals. . . . He was a worthless reprobate, a frequenter of the worse cafés in La Capital, and as our Capitán Kent can testify, a bandolero where the evidence

of his guilt had escaped the authorities. . . At the Appeals, he presented an ancient land grant from the King of Spain, and fought me for possession of the San Pedro plantation. Of course the land grant was proven worthless and he was laughed out of court.

"That was the last we heard of Ramon Natera, for the Americanos had taught all bandoleros how to behave themselves. But he was wiser than Buckalew, Cayo Baez, and Gomez, names of other bad men that firing squads wiped off the records at Fort Ozama, and hid himself in the mountains until the Americanos quit the country.

"Came his day however, when El Capitan, and his assistant the Sargento Linell, were the only two Americanos left behind here in uniform. . . Discharged from the marines, they accepted appointments in the Intelligence Office, through the management of our Secretary of Police, who knowing their records, needed their services greatly. . . Blessed was the day, not only for Dominicana, but for me, that these two brave Americanos donned the uniform of the Policia Nacional!"

Señor Canelon resorted to a water jar on the ebony stand, and quaffing a full glass, resumed—

"Well, with the coming of Ramon Natera's day, came plenty of trouble. He had gained many followers while inactive through his appeal to the lower classes, and many towns throughout the república suffered depredations, and the Policia Nacional were busy day and night chasing him through the hills and into the mountains. . . Then I began to feel his hand. Car loads of sugar cane were burned, one of my foremen was murdered because he knew too much, and then I was warned to leave the country or suffer the consequences. . . I ignored this, and in contempt I criticised Natera openly in Listin Diario.

"Meanwhile, El Capitán and his assistant made it so hot

for Natera, that it was assumed that he fled into Haiti. . . All was serene for a long time, and I felt entirely secure in forgetting about Natera, until one day a letter was delivered to me while on a tour of inspection in San Luis. I was requested to be present at a private meeting of the San Pedro's directors at a house in the Calle Arzobispo Portez, and the meeting had been arranged for that evening. Such meetings were not unusual, and the letter was embraced in the usual official manner.

"Innocent of any sinister purpose to the letter, I reported to the address given and met the directors. . . But they were directors headed by no other than Ramon Natera! . . . You can imagine my astonishment, but there was no escape. . . Bound and gagged, I was placed in an automobile and driven to the outskirts of La Capital, where waiting horses carried me and the bandoleros to San Isidro and the Crystal Caves.

"It was bad enough for them to hide me in any of these caves, for the place is a veritable labyrinth, but they chose an almost unapproachable lagoon, somewhere near the sea, and placed me on a small raft." . . .

The telling of his story at this point had ostensibly taxed the strength of the convalescing old gentlemen, for his breath was short, and what little color he had gained disappeared. He raised his bony hand in a gesture of appeal.

"I am forced now to ask our Capitán Kent to go on for me," he ended weakly.

Juanita smoothed the pillows behind his head, assisted him to a more comfortable position and helped him to more water. She then spoke to Kent.

"There now; no evasion Capitán—you must finish the story."

Kent shifted slightly in his chair and smiled.

"Well, I am forced to the issue, but I warn you to prepare

for the most miserable Spanish in all Dominicana—*guarte!*” (on your guard).

“Would that all Americanos could speak our tongue as well as you do, *Capitán*,” Aunt Combasa smiled at him, as she patted her brother’s hand.

The compliment pleased Kent, and he lost his timidity.

“How Ramon Natera knew of this hidden lagoon,” he began carefully, “is only an example of the information he receives from his countless friends. . . Suffice to say, that only due to a hint given me by a careless native was I aware that it really existed. . . Then it required a thorough, checker-board search and the climbing of trees every square hundred feet to discover it. It was walled in on all sides by a high cliff with a drop of perhaps a hundred feet to the water. The walls were covered with vines and fungi, and along the edges of the cliff, thick *cajuillas* bush and cacti proved an almost impenetrable screening to an approach. The lagoon itself must have its outlet through the Crystal Caves and thence to the sea. As for the river, its course must be nothing short of subterranean; a probable hidden tributary of the *Rio Seibo*.”

Kent crossed one knee and observed that his auditors were intensely interested.

“As the *Señor Canelon* states—Ramon Natera and his men lowered him down one side of the cliff, placed him on a small raft, evidently made for their purpose, and tied him securely to it.

“Left alone, his existence became torture with no shelter from the heat of day, nor comfort from cold, damp nights. . . Every other day he was visited by one of the *bandoleros* who brought him a little food, and there was always the demand that the *Señor* agree to the terms of *El Jefe* (chief)—to leave Dominicana immediately following liberation. But each time he refused and suffered stout cuffings and threats on his life. After a week of this, his fare was reduced to bread and water,

but bravely he defied Natera. . . Soon the bread and water was stopped and for several days nobody visited the lagoon. This was due no doubt to the nearness of the searching policia patrols.

"The Sargento Linell and I located the lagoon none too soon, for the Señor Canelon was burning up with fever and in a starving condition. Moreover, one of the blows struck by Natera's man made a deep cut in his neck, which through want of attention, had become a nasty, ulcerous wound. . . We rushed him to the hospital in Fort Ozama where his condition became critical, and it was during the crisis of the fever that I sent you that cablegram, Señorita, obtaining your address from the worthy Maria.

"Fortunately he passed the crisis successfully, but greater danger was imminent. . . His constitution was so hopelessly weak that the doctors, doing their utmost to kindle a dying flame, surrendered to the inevitable and gave him but two days to live. . . . I was glad then, that I sent the cablegram.

"The vigil continued longer than predicted, and then our dying man rallied, growing stronger each day.

"With efficient aid from the policia, we have hounded Natera and his band into the mountains above Seibo, where he remains in hiding in some natural stronghold that resists all efforts in finding. . . What pleases me, is that the sympathy of the natives in La Capital is now with the authorities since Listin Diario published an account describing Natera's activities in Haiti three or four years ago with a certain ill-famed Voodoo doctor. The account, although somewhat exaggerated is quite authentic.

"And now Señoras, rest assured that the Señor Canelon will be more cautious in attending meetings of the San Pedro firm. . . My headquarters for the present are in La Capital, and I beg to contribute my humble services in making your stay in Dominicana a safe and interesting one."

Admiration shone in Juanita's eyes. She had studied him carefully. Here was a real man; the type of man who did things but said little, and she felt that the true account of his courage and ability had been omitted. At some future time she would exploit the official record of this fine looking, nonchalant Americano!

Aunt Combasa had remained quietly pensive, but the look in her soft, gray eyes was akin to acclamation. As for Señor Canelon, some color had returned to his face and his expression harmonized with that of the two women.

Kent arose and stood by his chair.

"The afternoon is far spent, amigos finos," he said quietly, "and realizing that I have added more fatigue to the burden of your long trip, I must humbly beg permission to leave. . . I request that at some future time I may again be granted the opportunity of basking in the sunlight of this charming atmosphere?"

No grandee of old Spain could so well have polished off his parting tribute, which brought a sparkling light of approval to the eyes of Aunt Combasa.

"Why! You aren't leaving so soon, Capitán?" exclaimed the two women simultaneously.

"Most certainly not, Señoras!" declared Señor Canelon with finality. "El Capitán will remain for dinner!"

Kent smiled apologetically.

"Gracias, Señor, but it really is necessary that I return as soon as possible to La Capital. The Sargento Linell, my assistant, has stood his tour of duty for over two days, and it is both fair and imperative that I relieve him." . . .

"But, surely Capitán," interposed Juanita, "your remaining for dinner will not delay you appreciably?"

Kent hesitated, obviously tempted; then shook his head.

"You are very kind Señorita. . . I should enjoy nothing more—your own charming presence," he bowed deeply, "to

say nothing of your fascinating Aunt Señora Combasa," turning to that delighted lady with a second inclination of his head, "or the excellence of the Señor Canelon's dinners," smiling deferentially to his host. "But I'm afraid—this time, I must take myself off."

Juanita's face mirrored disappointment, yet she was mollified by his flattering manner.

"After that, you are excused," she pouted prettily in excellent English, much to the surprise of Kent. "The pleasure of talking with you in your native tongue must be deferred, I suppose," she added archly, "until you have the scalp of the bandolero Natera at your belt!"

Kent laughed outright, making a mental comment that this girl had not confined her education entirely to things Spanish.

"Another time—may I?" and he held out his hand to each in adieu.

In another moment he had quit the Casa Alhaja, taking with him the allegiance of the three he left.

And to Juanita, as she closed her weary eyes in sleep that night, Spain was far, far away.



CHAPTER III

Rafael Nunez, gambler, forger, and libertine of the tropics, spent a rather comfortable night despite an over indulgence of carta blanca, his favorite intoxicant. He suffered no qualms that attend an aftermath of inebriation as he arose with the morning sun just rimming the horizon far across the housetops. Through the open window its red and gold splendor glorified the narrow confines of the bedroom.

He dressed hurriedly, puffing an early cigaret, and filling the room with smoke. His scrawny neck and arms were enveloped in a silk shirt, a pink and green creation from a local booth. Bony legs disappeared into gray, Panama trousers, and white canvas shoes were laced on his feet.

Donning his coat, he surveyed himself with appraising eyes in the oval mirror over an antique dresser near the door. For in truth, Rafael Nunez admired himself more than anything else in his immediate world. Handsome, and of lavender complexion, his gleaming white teeth accentuated a small, well cultivated moustache as he smiled at his reflection. He was a Don Juan of Dominicana. At least, so he had been told by the free-loving señoritas of the Villa Barahona.

He was apparently satisfied with his appearance, for he strode over to one corner of the room and sat down at a small writing table close to the open window.

He lit another cigaret from the stub of the first and picked up a pen. Toying with it a moment, he dipped it into an ink-pot, and with nervous tremors of his hand began writing. The puckering of his brow and the intensity of his concen-

tration, to the point of forgetting his cigaret, was an indication that he was writing a message of importance.

With intermittent dipping of pen and scratching of paper, he turned the missive over and dried it upon the green blotting pad. Sealing it in a long envelope, he placed it inside his pocket and arose.

He paid another visit to the mirror and adjusted a stiff rimmed straw hat on his head to a rakish angle. Then picking up a cane hanging by the side of the mirror, he left the room and descended to the street.

He was detained on the sidewalk by a wretched old man in rags, who thrust a long strip of pink and blue lottery tickets under his nose.

"Buenos dias, Señor!" he greeted in a cracked, high pitched voice. "Sirvase, (please) buy your numbers early, and like the early worm you will win an early fortune!"

Nunez with an outburst of anger, swept the tickets out of the old man's hand and dashed them to the sidewalk.

"Get out of my way, dirty old rana! (frog). Let the poor fools who always lose buy your tickets!"

He turned on his heel as the interloper moved out of his way, and strode hurriedly up the street.

The old man shook an angry fist at the back of Nunez, and then reached down to pick up his tickets.

The pretty Calle Padre Bellini, boasting of the best looking houses in La Capital, and with its little park named after the historic priest, forming a central prominence along the narrow thoroughfare, was free of pedestrians save for the old man and Nunez. The latter had disappeared around a corner of the park, going in the direction of the Parque Colon.

The old man tarried directly in front of the house quitted by Nunez, apparently content to await the appearance of other prospective buyers of his tickets.

Suddenly, he turned, and with amazing display of agility

for one of his years, darted into the doorway. He paused at the base of the steps in the dark passageway and stood alert as though listening for sounds. Then his entire aspect of old age changed suddenly. He no longer stooped with drooping shoulders, nor did his knees bend to the weight of his body. He tilted back his straw sombrero a bit, exposing dark eyes of youthful brightness, a lie to the white beard and wrinkled, old bronzed face.

Mounting the stairs with a firm tread, he kept one ear cocked in listening attitude over the iron railing. But the patting of his straw sandals on the slate steps was the only sound audible in the house. The top of the stairs was reached without challenge, and he found himself looking in through the open doorway of the bedroom vacated by Nunez.

A cart rumbled past outside and church bells began ringing in discordant clamor with the rhythm of a blacksmith plying his hammer, calling the natives to their early tasks.

The lottery man stepped into the room quickly and saw at a glance that it was unoccupied, and the disarranged bedding on the big bed in the center of the room and tousled mosquito netting at its head, indicated an early rising by the one who had lain there.

Closing the door after him and drawing home the bolt, he then proceeded to make a thorough search of the room, glancing into everything that came within range of his vision. He rummaged through a wardrobe closet, going through the pockets of men's clothing hanging inside. His reward was meager; odd pieces of money, a small pearl handled, folding dirk, and a few billets of paper with notes scribbled on them. He read the writings, and one brought a smile to his leathery face. . . .

"Mercedes Baptista, No. 88 Calle General Lupon."

Producing the stub of a pencil and a card from beneath his ragged camisa, the lottery man copied the name and address.

It was quite evident that his object was not robbery, for he returned the things he had examined to their respective places in the clothing and closed the wardrobe door. Then his eyes fell on the small writing table, but as he moved over to it footsteps sounded along the corridor outside. They drew nearer and then several knocks fell upon the bolted door.

"Señor Nunez! . . . Excúseme—it is after six of the hour!"

The lottery man remained quite still as he recognized the voice as that of a woman. The knocking was repeated; there followed a pause, and then with an exclamation of displeasure, the woman left the door and descended the stairs.

"Guess you arrived here none too soon, Frank old boy," the lottery man whispered in plain English, and turning proceeded to examine the writing table. There was a center drawer and two at one side. He searched through each, and finding them empty was about to turn away, when his sharp eyes fell on the green writing pad. The blotted writing there held his attention.

Scenting a find, he picked up the pad and carrying it over to the dresser, placed it so that the writing reflected in the mirror. It was Spanish, nicely written but quite indistinct. His eyes sparkled as carefully he spelled out the words—

"Muy Jefe:

"All is ready at Augusto's. Send the Frenchman with the arms Monday at 2:00 of the hour. El Policia are quiet, which means the Americanos are busy. The Señora Baptista is already here, yet you had better not come to La Capital this time.

"Ustedes—Nunez."

"Ah, my noble caballero!" exclaimed the lottery man, a broad smile enlarging the wrinkles in his face. "So, the stage is set for Monday at 2:00—hub? . . . The 'gook' must mean 2:00 o'clock in the morning, or else he's plumb loco! . . . And—'the Americanos are busy'? . . . That's too damned bad,

Nunez's old stick-in-the-mud'! . . . Too bad for your Jefe!"

Returning the blotting pad to its place on the table, he produced the card on which he had already made notes, and copied the message imprinted in the pad.

Going to the open window he peered down into the street. The church bells had ceased ringing and many natives were hurrying along the street, an effort by them only seen in the early morning. The sun was higher, shining down on the rooftops, and already denied the day any prospects of relief.

Suddenly he realized that to reach the street would necessitate an encounter with the woman of the house.

"Well, I've got to take a chance," he muttered, "or break my neck jumping from the window!"

Crossing the room, he listened at the door before slipping the bolt. Satisfied, he opened it to a slight crack. Sounds of someone chopping wood came from a rear room below.

He swung the door wide, and leaving it so, proceeded to negotiate the stairs. His progress was snail-like, hesitating at each step, ever ready to beat a hasty retreat back into the room. The sound of splitting wood grew louder as he neared the last step, and a woman's voice, the voice that called at the bolted door, could be heard above the din, calling a child. Another moment and he was out in the street.

The capital had been fairly aroused to the awaiting opportunities of a new day, and traffic along the Calle Padre Bellini had greatly increased.

The lottery man squashed his sombrero down over his eyes, and as he moved up the narrow thoroughfare, his movements and general appearance had reassumed senility.

Shuffling past the little park, he turned the corner of the Calle Arzobispo Nouel. In his hands were the long strips of lottery tickets, and he occasionally called out the advantages of their sale.

The populace was fully ãstir. Coches, carts, and vehicles of varied description rolled by. A few public coches lined the quadrangle of Parque Colon awaiting fares, the horses still sleepy and inanimate as were the cocheros. Shops and warehouses were wide open, for the greatest amount of business was transacted in the morning; the afternoon devoted to tropical procrastination—siesta.

Tardy cane workers hurried to the fields, their machetes gleaming in the sun from their belts, and their bare, black feet slapping the dust in the street. Parque Colon was a riot of color. Blue, white, and yellow camisas of the cane workers, khaki uniforms of soldiers brushing by; bananas green but ripe and various fruits piled on the stalls, the chalky whiteness of the buildings splashed here and there with glaring signs; the park an oasis of green around the statue of Columbus—all like an artist's palette ready for the brush.

Beneath broad, straw sombreros, narrower straw hats, or Panamas, were kinky visaged faces or smooth faces, ebon hued, mulatto, octoroon, or possibly caucasian. The heat of morning was beginning its relentless punishment, but a slight breeze from the Carribean made it tolerable. Carts bumped along, bells of coches tinkled, vendors shouted, and the air was filled with dust, carrying with it the smells of a dirty and unsanitary city.

The lottery man entered Parque Colon, made a circuit of the statue of Columbus, accosting passersby to buy his tickets, and then sat down on a wooden bench beneath the cool and inviting shade of a gigantic royal palm.

He had scarcely relaxed, when a tall, smart looking officer in the uniform of a captain of the Policia Nacional, approached and grasped him by the collar of his dirty looking camisa.

"Here, you old rana!" he demanded imperiously, "let me look at your tickets?"

The lottery man cringed in his seat, yet the look in his eyes belied his fearful gesture.

He presented his tickets to the officer, who though becoming deeply engrossed in an examination of the tickets, said under his breath in English, almost a whisper—

“Did you find anything worth your trouble Frank, old boy?”

The lottery man glanced furtively about him.

“Yes, Phil—it was a good steer when you trailed Nunez to his lodgings last night.”

He smiled up at Philip Kent, while the latter marveled at the clever disguise of his assistant.

Kent's blue eyes shone with great interest.

“Good! . . . Leave me now Frank, but meet me at the sub-station right away—that is, take your time getting there!”

Frank Linell nodded slightly and puckered one eye in a suggestive wink.

Kent passed back the tickets and reverted to Spanish loudly.

“Caramba! Those tickets are a week old. . . . If you do not get out of La Capital pronto—I shall lock you up in the car-cel! . . . Vamos!”

“Si, Señor Capitán—I will, I will!” whined Linell, rising and backing away respectfully, touching the rim of his sombrero. He then turned quickly about and made off in the direction of Colon Cathedral towering above the palm trees. But instead of quitting the park, he made a detour from the spot where Kent had been standing, and from a vantage point behind a boxed Spanish bayonet, saw his brother American cross the Calle Padre Bellini and enter the Calle Separacion.

Five minutes later Philip Kent entered the Policia sub-station, a low building of adobe built against the old Portez Independencia wall, which commanded a view of the entire length of the long Calle Separacion and passersby entering the city proper under the ancient archway.

Frank Linell had preceeded him and was seated at a desk in company with Lieutenant Juan Ramirez, a promising young native officer of marked intelligence.

Both men arose with alacrity and saluted Kent with rigid courtesy.

Linell looked so incongruous now in his disguise, with his big sombrero tilted back on his kinky white wig, smiling broadly and showing his true self, not unlike an actor resting between scenes.

"Keep your seats, caballeros," Kent said pleasantly, closing the door after him and drawing up another chair. Sitting down with them, he directed his attention to the native officer.

"Well, Teniente, the Sargento Linell and I have been trailing our mutual friend Rafael Nunez, and our time has not been wasted. . . The Sargento has found something important." He then directed his gaze to Linell.

"Frank—let the cat out of the bag!"

Linell flicked the ashes off the cigaret he was smoking, and reaching inside his camisa, produced his card and handed it to Kent.

"Well, there is hardly much to say. . . I searched Nunez's quarters and found that address in one of his coats. I was despairing of finding anything else worth while, and was on the point of leaving, when I noticed the imprint of writing on a desk pad. . . It was reversed of course, but I deciphered it in a mirror and copied the message on the other side of that card. . . The address of the woman is of negligible importance, yet her name is very familiar. . . ."

"Familiar!" echoed Kent, turning over the card. "Don't you remember 'Mercedes Baptista'—Ramon Natera's mistress? . . Why, we thought he shipped her over to Port-au-Prince last winter." Kent laughed. "Well, this new address of hers is of more importance than we think, and furnishes the incentive for such a message—business and pleasure you

know. . . . But pray go on Frank; was there anything else?"

"No, that was all, only Nunez seemed to be in a great hurry, leaving his quarters with the ringing of the church bells."

"Of course he was in a hurry," said Kent smiling over the message on the card. "Perhaps it had been better had I told you to keep on his trail, but nevertheless we seem to learn more by keeping him free. . . . This message to Natera is a real find and furnishes the information I failed to get last night." And for the apparent benefit of Lieutenant Ramirez, he read the message aloud.

"No. 19 Calle Libertad," he repeated. "That is Augusto's place, the little house on the hill where I trailed Nunez last night."

Lieutenant Ramirez was so attentive, that his little black eyes never left Kent's face since he had first spoken.

Kent placed the card on the desk in front of him, studied it a moment and then continued.

"Well, despite the fact that Nunez omitted which meridian of the day for the shipment of the arms, it is safe to assume that he meant 2:00 o'clock Monday morning. . . . Such an invaluable omission proved that he was in haste to get his message off to the hills. . . . His reference to the Frenchman is quite confusing, unless Ramon Natera has some Haitien on his payroll. . . . Well, the time for shipment of the arms is fully five days hence, and there is the possibility of an answer to his message before that time.

"First, we must be on the lookout for a messenger, and next arrange a reception committee at Augusto's at 2:00 o'clock Monday morning."

He turned to Lieutenant Ramirez.

"Would you care to join us on that raiding party, Teniente?"

Ramirez's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, and his brown, smooth-shaven face wreathed in a smile of delight. His silver toned Castilian voice filled the little office with its resonance.

"I shall feel highly honored Capitán to aid you to the utmost of my poor ability, providing you will arrange my detachment from the station. . . Your brother officers fully appreciate what you and the Sargento are doing for Dominicana, and it is high time that we natives contribute something worthy, instead of permitting you Americanos to do all the work."

Admiration shone in Kent's eyes.

"Well said, Ramirez—consider yourself detached at once!"

He paused a moment in thought.

"Now, experiences in the past have taught us that the complete success of a surprise to our enemies depends on absolute secrecy. That is why just the three of us are going to visit Augusto's place Monday morning. . . Surely we should prove quite capable of handling the bandoleros when they arrive with the firearms?"

A vision of Kent's capability suddenly flashed through the mind of Lieutenant Ramirez, with the remembrance of a day when he stood close by, on the rifle range at the training center in Jaina, and beheld the Americano puncture a silver peso with his heavy automatic pistol, seven times at twenty yards, leaving hardly enough silver in the coin to buy a copy of *Listin Diario*.

Frank Linell said nothing, yet his dark eyes smiled. It was immaterial to him whether his brother marine in the World War suggested tackling a horde of ferocious Voodoo worshippers, or eating some cream puffs. The incentive was equally satisfactory.

Kent did not wait for a rejoinder.

"As I have an appointment with El Secretario within a half hour, Teniente, I shall let the Sargento Linell go over with you in detail my plans for the raid. . . You see, I was up at Augusto's once last night, and before the Sargento and I retired we talked the matter over. . . . Our good friend Nunez

was considerate enough to inform us what time to expect the bándoleros, and that is what we needed most."

And as Ramirez acceded, Kent turned to Linell.

"As you are still in disguise, Frank, you had better look up that address of Mercedes Baptista. . . . If it be true that she has returned to La Capital, more trouble is in store for us. She is a very intelligent and dangerous woman!"

He pushed back his chair and arose.

"And now for the present, caballeros—I shall say, adios!"

The others arose simultaneously and saluted respectfully.

Kent left the little office, and passing under the arch, hailed the first coche passing.

"To Police Headquarters, hombre!"

As the coche, sounding its bell swung around the Parque Independencia, another coche with its hood rolled back passed quite near.

Kent obtained a glimpse of the handsome, dark face of Rafael Nunez smiling into the face of a beautiful, well dressed white woman sitting by his side.

"Mercedes Baptista!" he murmured, recognizing the woman.

CHAPTER IV

From the portico of the Casa Alhaja, and through the line of swaying palm trees guarding the white beach, the sapphire Caribbean sparkled and danced, silver and blue under a kindly morning sun.

Far out on its broad bosom lay a small fishing boat, its sail a speck of white, not unlike a detached bit of the great cloud tumbling over the horizon.

Resting comfortably in a lounging chair in the shaded corner of the portico overlooking the green patio sat Aunt Señora Combasa. She had dropped her novel in her lap to gaze in admiration at the vista through the palm trees. She looked stately and beautiful in a dress of gray chiffon high at the throat. Gone was the lace mantilla, and her mass of gray hair en coiffure, with a handsome tortoise shell comb surmounting it, shone like silver.

She was thinking, seriously, as her gaze centered on the expanse of blue. Was the debonair Señor De Gabriels quite serious in his attentions to her niece? He had called again last evening to pay his respects, respects which centered solely on Juanita. Such visits had been frequent, each becoming longer than the first, with the patio reserved for just two people. Handsome, and possessing a finer personality than she had hitherto ascertained during the voyage from Spain, there was no mistaking his true objective. She liked the consul immensely, for there was nothing about him to invite censure, although she resented somewhat his monopoly of Juanita's society.

One evening, (and she smiled broadly thinking of it) when the Capitán Philip Kent, visiting with De Gabriels, won Juanita away from the consul with Yankee diplomacy, she noted that her niece responded willingly; in fact, eagerly. And, strangely, when Juanita returned from the patio she was not the same Juanita. Her face was flushed, and her exchange of conversation for the remainder of the evening was listless and lacked enthusiasm. This was a tell-tale sign to Aunt Combasa's worldly mind, and when Juanita complained to her of the few visits of the Americano, exhibiting quite recently a touch of irritation, she decided then and there that the Señor De Gabriels had an Americano obstacle to surmount in his campaign for the heart of her niece. This possible rivalry, if such it might prove to be, amused her, but if asked the question which rival she favored to win, she would decide immediately on the Americano. This decision was caused not because Philip Kent had saved the life of her brother, but she adhered to woman's intuition, that the Americano was the type of man who would make Juanita happy.

The little fishing boat had disappeared over the horizon, blotted out by the big cloud as Aunt Combasa, pleased with her thoughts, picked up her novel and resumed her reading.

Far up the twisting road of Boca Chica and close to its outskirts, a cloud of thick gray dust arose, and as it gradually drifted away in the light breeze from the sea an automobile rolled into view. It was coming on in the direction of the town, and it was plainly seen now, a delapidated Ford touring car, churning up the dust and disturbing the quietude with its rattle and drone.

Aunt Combasa arose from her chair just as the car drew up in front of Alhaja, and she was greeted pleasantly by Captain Philip Kent.

Kent looked fresh and smart in his khaki uniform as he got out of the car and walked up the portico steps.

"Why, Capitán Felipe!" smiled Aunt Combasa offering her hand. "How very good it is to see you again."

"Well, it is rather informal, this morning visit, Señora," said Kent, "but the opportunity was afforded me to run down, and here I am—glad also to see you again."

Aunt Combasa smiled into his blue eyes.

"Buenos!" A waggish thought crossed her mind. "It is really too bad that I am alone here. . . . Juanita will be disappointed that she did not remain at home this morning." She took instant note of the frown on his strong face as he leaned lightly against the portico railing.

"Then the Señorita Juanita is away for the day?" he asked dismally, glancing at the open door on his right. Aunt Combasa elevated her chin and her expression became severe, as deeper grew the extent of her humor.

"Well, she is not at home, that is all—not at home to you!"

An expression of surprise charged with pain showed in Kent's face.

"Why, Señora! I do not quite understand, unless—unless. . . ."

Aunt Combasa laughed outright, and rising from her chair took his arm and turned him about so that he faced the sea.

"Unless, Capitán, you walk straight down to the beach, find Juanita and bring her home!"

Kent's relief was manifested by a broad grin.

"Then I may go looking for her?"

"Most certainly—providing . . ."

"Si, Señora!"

"Providing you remain for luncheon. . . Brother Reynaldo will be home from the plantation at 2:00, luncheon hour, and he will be glad to see you."

Kent pondered.

"Such a pleasure is readily accepted Señora, for I really

have something in confidence to tell the Señor Canelon, but it is imperative that I return to La Capital by 4:00."

Aunt Combasa's smile was beaming.

"Then you have plenty of time, my dear Felipe; that is, if too much time is not spent down on the beach."

Kent grimaced pleasantly over the allusion, and with a *responde propre* was off down the white coral pathway and into the road. He waved back to the portico before losing himself in the palm grove directly across the road.

Wending his way through the trees he came out on the hard white beach. The sparkling surf boomed up to him in greeting, streamed out like a mirror, and then receded swiftly with its doleful, steamlike murmur. The day was beautiful and the breeze from the sea enlivened his spirits. He breathed in the salt air deeply, searching the beach with his eyes. There was not a soul in sight, the beach was his alone.

For a moment he suffered qualms of disappointment, and then he espied the hem of a pink dress showing a few inches out from the base of a giant palm directly ahead of him. His spirits ascended, and with boyish thoughts he approached the tree stealthily. Without discovery he reached it, and grasping its plates of bark peered around it.

Juanita Canelon, black curls tumbled about her shoulders, lay sound asleep against the foot of the tree.

Kent studied her sweet countenance half raised to the blue sky, and for a moment he was transfixed with reverential wonder. Her full red lips were half turned toward him, and her long silken eyelashes quivered on her rounded cheeks. The lips slightly pursed were tempting, and the closed eyes hardly a discouragement.

Brave and designing was his step as he rounded the tree and knelt down beside her. A fearful tremor came over him lest his unrestrained impulse be discovered as he bent forward. Another moment and the kiss would have been his, when the

great lashes rolled back and his eager eyes gazed into shining pools of black.

He recoiled ashamed, realizing now acutely how bold was the liberty he attempted. But Juanita exhibited neither surprise nor fear; just a calmly hesitant look, and then smiled sweetly, sitting up.

"Why, Felipe Kent! . . . How long have you been here?"

Kent felt like a big, lumbering bear as he moved back and sat down beside her. Some excuse was necessary for his awkward position. Trying to avoid a direct glance into those soft eyes which already were brimming with pleasure, he toyed with the buckle of his Sam Brown belt.

"Just arrived Juanita—just in time to prevent a giant mosquito from feasting on your cheek!"

Instinctively, Juanita brushed both cheeks.

"How silly of me to fall asleep!" she exclaimed in confusion. "The delightful shade of this palm, and the cool breeze made me drowsy. . . Do excuse my untidy appearance," and she raised her arms to pin up her disordered locks.

"Don't! Juanita," begged Kent, as he watched her. "You are lovely with it tumbling over your shoulders."

Juanita's eyes widened in feigned astonishment.

"And you came all the way down from La Capital to tell me that I look better with hair disheveled at this time of day, when the evening is woman's best time to fool you men? . . . For once I am found at a disadvantage."

"Comb or hairpins are unnecessary to bring out your beauty," he countered. "You are the very breath of nature and belong in a beautiful garden along with the flowers and the sun."

Juanita read the sincerity in his blue eyes, yet she wagged her head and then tilted up her rounded chin.

"To wilt and die too, because of no attention probably."

Kent reached over and gently grasped her free hand. His serious expression sobered her face.

"Meaning, Juanita, that I have been neglectful?"

She did not remove her hand from his, but dropped her gaze to the sand at her feet. Strangely, it seemed he was assuming no liberty in holding her hand. In fact, Philip Kent did not know he was the only man permitted to do so. He was ignorant too that his touch thrilled her, bringing a wistful expression to her face.

But just as Kent was on the point of speaking again, there came a sharp—"crack"—in the air just over his head and a bullet imbedded itself in the tree with a sharp ping near Juanita. Diving forward in front of her as a screen, he whipped out his automatic pistol from its holster under his left armpit inside his blouse. The dull after report of a rifle came to his ears far up the beach. He knew it was a long distance shot, perhaps six hundred yards away.

Juanita, slightly pale, pressed closely behind his broad shoulders.

"What is it Feilpe?" she whispered.

He did not reply at once, but a grim smile tightened his features as his sharp eyes detected a minute figure scampering away from concealment far out of range of his pistol. He rose quickly, and assisting Juanita to her feet, grasped her hand and gazed calmly down into her startled eyes.

"The danger is over for the present, little lady, but move with me into the grove and keep close to my side until we reach Alhaja—there may be others."

Juanita made no reply and together they left the beach and wended their way through the palm trees. Kent, keenly alert with pistol ready, talked as they went.

"The devils! Taking a pot shot at me with you in the way. . . If they had harmed you Juanita, I could easily kill Ramon Natera though he begged for his life!"

The color had returned to Juanita's cheeks, for Kent's coolness and his strong hand holding her own made her feel secure.

His words though charged with great anger stirred her deeply, telling her much.

"Then this is more of Ramon Natera's work, Felipe?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "That was Natera's answer to our capture of one Rafael Nunez and three other bandoleros who were bringing firearms into La Capital three days ago. . . . Incidentally, it was immediately following their trial this morning that I hurried down here to see you."

"Were any of our policia hurt during the capture?"

"No, to the contrary, not a single shot was fired. . . . Our plans were carefully laid, and vantage points so well placed about the house to which the firearms were consigned that escape was impossible. It was but the work of minutes to seize bandoleros, arms and all. . . . The action of the court was quick and decisive, and this Nunez and his companions were sentenced to ten years at hard labor. . . . To-day was Ramon Natera's first attempt at reprisal and not the last."

"Then do you think we are safe at Alhaja, Felipe?"

"Yes, they would make no attack on Alhaja, for you have noticed no doubt that the policia patrols have been doubled, but it would be wise not to venture around Boca Chica alone. . . . I shall impress El Secretario with the necessity of stationing a local patrol indefinitely in the town. That will reduce further danger to a minimum; so for the present you must be content to remain in your patio."

Juanita smiled at this.

"Neglected, Felipe?"

For want of a fitting rejoinder, Kent gently squeezed her hand.

They had reached the edge of the road and beheld Aunt Combasa leaning over the portico railing of Alhaja, talking to a small group of mounted men in uniform.

"There is the roving patrol now," said Kent releasing her hand.

Aunt Combasa greeted them relievingly as they approached.

"I am glad you returned, Capitán Felipe? . . . I have been explaining to these good policia that I heard the sound of a gun down on the beach."

Kent turned to Juanita.

"Do join your aunt, Juanita and explain what happened without alarming her; say it was an accidental shot. . . . I shall remain to give these men instructions."

"You will stay for luncheon, Felipe—please?"

"Gracias, yes, if you will grant me a few moments with you in the patio? . . . I expect an answer to my interrupted question down on the beach."

Juanita nodded, and laughing lightly ran up the portico steps.

A tall sergeant, evidently the leader of the group of horsemen, dismounted, and leading his horse approached Kent and saluted.

"We are on our third circuit, Capitán, and la señora reports that there has been shooting down on the beach. . . . I will thank El Capitán for orders?"

"Yes, Sargento," replied Kent. "One of Natera's men took a long shot at me while I was down on the beach. . . . There is no question that he is safely hidden in the town by this time, but you had better look over the natives, especially in the café and over near the plantation. First, send two of your men over to the plantation to escort the Señor Canelon home to luncheon. . . . You remember him of course?"

"Si, Capitán—the manager general of the San Pedro."

"Very well, and before you return to Marcoris report to me here, I may accompany you. . . . Look sharply now, for somebody must have seen that bandolero with his rifle."

"Pardon, Capitán, sirvase," said the Sergeant. "Would it

not be wise to leave one of my men here to guard you while I search the town?"

Kent appreciated the thought, but shaking his head, placed a hand on the non-com's shoulder and smiled into the black face.

"No, you could use the man to better purpose; besides, if you had been the hombre who took that shot at me and missed, would you come back and try again?"

The non-com grinned.

"Ah—no, Capitán! At least, not until you were crippled in both hands and stone blind!"

Sobering instantly, he clicked his heels, saluted, and calling out orders to his men, mounted up and the little troop trotted away in a cloud of dust.

Kent turning about found the portico deserted. He surveyed the palm grove for a few moments, smiling over the sergeant's humorous allusion, and then mounting the steps joined the ladies inside.

CHAPTER V

Far out in the hills northwest of Seibo, where the country became wild and scarcely inhabited, a solitary horseman drew rein along a narrow mountain trail, while an afternoon sun beat down in all its torrid intensity, creating a dazzling heat mirage high above. Bordered by cacti and Spanish bayonet the trail arose in serpentine course toward Los Cordilleras, a lofty, blue-gray range of mountains overshadowing the hills.

The horseman permitted his hemp reins to drop carelessly across the horse's short neck as he reached inside the only pocket of his dirty white jacket for a cigaret. His dress betokened him a hillman, and yet there was a difference in comparison to the thin, emaciated looking peasant of the hills. His was a heavy, well-fed body, and because he wore a new, straw sombrero and sported rawhide boots, the simile ended. For the boots alone were flaring evidence that he was of higher station, irrespective of owning a horse.

As he lit his cigaret, the rays of the sun struck his face, showing a livid scar extending across the length of one cheek that drew up one corner of his mouth in distortion. It was a malignant face, black, and with white birthmarks to match the scar. His legs hung free over the sides of the horse, for his simple, woven straw saddle was without stirrups.

He sat for a while smoking, but at length tossed away the half consumed cigaret, gathered in the reins, and prodded the horse, a sorry looking specimen, small and afflicted with mange, onward up the mountain.

The spot where he had halted was close to where the timber line of Los Cordilleras began, an oasis to the sun-baked, spiny

waste below. Scrub mahogany trees arose in vast numbers, overtowered by an occasional mangrove here and there. The entire side of the high range was a sea of green, while the flat table land below was a wasted, spiny area.

The horseman had scarcely entered the timber line, when he turned his horse away from the trail, which had narrowed to a mere streak of division, and crashed through the heavy underbrush to his left. The horse stepped gingerly, for needle points of cacti threatened its fetlocks. The sure manner in which the rider guided the little animal was proof that he was well acquainted with the terrain through which he moved. He avoided a Spanish bayonet now and then, and the horse shied at a monster tarantula in its path. For a moment the great spider deliberated, its clawlike tail curved menacingly over its furry black body, and then suddenly scurried out of the way of trampling hoofs.

About five kilometers due north from the trail, the trees became extremely dense, and the horse's progress was arduous and painful. Climbing was very steep and passage stubbornly disputed by gnarled undergrowth and thick cajuillas bush. It was at this point that the horseman bent low over the cantle in apparent listening attitude.

Just when further progress became almost hopeless, shafts of sunlight shone through the trees, and horse and rider emerged into a small clearing, a veritable grassy mesa, overtowered by a high cliff slanting precipitously downward from the highest peak of Los Cordilleras.

The horseman drew rein at the clearing's edge and centered his gaze on a gigantic boulder standing erect, fully ten feet high and half as wide in the very center of the clearing. He sat quietly in the saddle a moment or two, and then grunting in evident disgust, dismounted. Leading his horse, he moved forward in the direction of the boulder.

From concealment directly ahead, a loud raucous voice in challenge caused him to stop suddenly.

"Stand where you are, hombre!"

Horse and master remained immovable.

"Quien es el presidente de Dominicana?" demanded the voice.

"Ask Ramon Natera, El Jefe!" answered the horseman gruffly, perturbed yet patient.

In a moment a half clad figure made its sudden appearance from behind the boulder; a short, chubby black man in rags and tattered straw sombrero. A magazine rifle was held in the crook of his left arm and it pointed in the horseman's direction. He stepped forward rather eagerly, a masked grin on his kinky bearded face.

"Salud, Ortega! . . . I knew it was you all the time, but you know how strict El Jefe is about the pass-word?"

Ortega grunted in savage disdain, and his look at the sentinel was far from friendly. He looped his reins over one arm.

"Caramba! . . . Leave it to you, dear Julio to look out for that . . . You will become a general one day with your eternal obedience." There was much sarcasm in Ortega's tone and he moved forward abreast of the sentinel, who had already turned and was walking back to the boulder.

"Si, hermano," retorted Julio, trailing his rifle and smiling broadly. "General it is! . . . Generally careful of obeying El Jefe, and keeping my general good health."

Ortega grunted unintelligibly, ignoring the other's wit, and kicked out with his foot at a little, gray lizard in his path. The reptile spat at him contemptuously, hissed, and ran for shelter under a nearby fern.

Julio quickened his pace, and reaching the boulder ahead of Ortega, disappeared behind it. When the latter joined him, the little man was on his knees bent forward, searching with

one hand under the giant rock. He glanced up at Ortega, a somewhat serious expression on his ebon face.

"You have been gone a long time, Ortega, and El Jefe is loco mad."

"It was not my fault," replied Ortega, concern in his voice, and restraining his horse which was stamping the grass restlessly on all fours. "I had a hard time locating the Señora Mercedes, and to delay me further, the mounted patrol forced me to lead them a blind chase to the south."

Julio was apparently unimpressed for he knew only too well his companion's fondness for carta blanca. He smiled sagely as his hand at last encountered what it was searching, for it brought to light a long, heavy strand of steel rope. He looked up again.

"That Mercedes! . . . She could not remain away from El Jefe very long—huh? . . . Port-au-Prince was perhaps too lonely."

Ortega swore softly.

"Perhaps dear Julio, but to my way of thinking, Natera sent for her, and good it is . . . She and the Frenchman, Belgarde, can make it very hot for the Americanos . . . But, carajo! I am already late enough without wasting words with you . . . Pronto—open up!"

Julio made no further comment, and as though in obedience, he arose quickly and pulled out four feet of steel rope, holding it stretched out attached at the other end under the boulder. He motioned for Ortega to stand back, the latter complying immediately, jerking on his horse's mouth.

Julio twisted a foot of the rope around his arm, and leaning backward pulled gradually on it.

Strictly against the law of gravitation, nine square feet of earth thickly covered with grass began to rise slowly from the very earth itself directly in front of the boulder like the hinged cover of a box. Simultaneously with its rising, the boulder

tilted toward Julio to an angle of thirty degrees. It stopped at that angle, as likewise the square of earth which was almost perpendicular. Planking and beams of mahogany plastered here and there with cement showed on the bottom side of the strange door, where earth and grass roots had mysteriously taken hold. It was plainly a mechanical contrivance, worthy of an expert engineer. The boulder served its purpose as a balance and nature had aided the cunning mind devising it. There were no sounds during the operation, nor dust or earth became detached.

A great black hole yawned at the feet of Ortega, easily large enough to engulf a score of men.

Ortega knelt, and reaching down in one corner of the mammoth hole produced a stout fagot of wood discolored with pitch and charring. He struck a match and ignited one end of the fagot. As it sizzled and spouted flame, the horse pricked up its ears and pawed the ground.

With a parting "adios" to Julio, Ortega held the torch away from him, and without hesitancy stepped boldly down into the great gulf of blackness. He did not drop out of sight but descended gradually on an inclined plane. His shoulders still visible, he turned and pulled on his horse's mouth. The horse required little persuasion, for it stepped in the hole rather eagerly and descended in a shambling, sliding manner after its master who had now disappeared.

Julio standing tense on the other side of the boulder waited until the horse was out of sight, and then released the steel rope slowly, bending forward in unity with the gradual, upward rise of the boulder.

As the great door dropped silently over the hole, leaving the clearing as naturally unbroken as before, the light of Ortega's torch revealed a broad ledge of rock ahead of him continuing on in gradual descent. To the right and over the edge of the ledge a great abyss of blackness was the only encouragement

to a slipping foot along the narrow passage. High overhead giant stalactites hung suspended in grotesque shapes and all colors from the cavern roof.

The horse snorted in fear, shying, as several mammoth tarantulas showed themselves in the light of the torch directly in the path of horse and man. Ortega lowered his torch and described rapid circles over the great insects, and as he anticipated, they scrambled with rasping sounds up the face of the wall and into crevices of lime.

The descent of the ledge ended at last, but it continued onward on a level stretch, and where the darkness over the right side of the ledge had revealed nothingness, a large, sparkling pool of water reflected Ortega's flaming torch perhaps a hundred feet below. A damp mustiness assailed the nostrils, and a dripping as of water upon rock could be heard overhead.

The stalactites diminished in size, and now where the ledge began to ascend, they were no longer to be seen. Progress for man and beast was slow and laborious, and would have proven extremely hazardous had not crude steps been cut at intervals of fifteen feet by the hand of man.

The pool was left behind, swallowed up in the Hadean darkness as Ortega turning at each step, guided his horse upward and onward. The ledge became narrower and more slippery due to a heavy, red slime covering it. Another level stretch was reached and Ortega, drenched with perspiration muttered words of relief. The horse also showed sagacious signs of having reached the bigger stage of the journey, and to the contrary of appearing fatigued, it became restless and forged ahead of its master. A cruel snapping of the reins subdued it, but the continued gait of both was eagerly increased.

Soon a pencil point of light was discernible a long way off, shining like a diamond set in a bed of jet. As the light grew larger the ledge now became an enclosed passageway, for an-

other wall arose to the right, stealing the shadows from its opposite.

The light ahead became more illuminating than the torch, proving to be a shaft of sunlight. It had widened to such an extent, that definite lines of the passageway's exit showed plainly, broad and arched, and but a hundred yards more the green of trees and bushes could be distinguished beyond the exit.

Reaching the exit's anterior, Ortega extinguished the torch and placed it away in a niche of the wall. He then strode out into the sunlight of late afternoon with his horse close to his shoulder.

A broad plateau stretched out before him, fertile and covered with grass, and the shining, thick leafed cajillas bush was much in evidence. It was like coming out suddenly on one's rooftop to view all things far below. To the south, the Cordilleras towering one above the other, raised their gray ridges to kiss the blue sky. And to the east whence he had issued, was a continuation of the mountain range linked by green hills. From the edge of the plateau on the west side, just a stone's throw from the tunnel's exit, the broad Sanchez Valley nestled as in a cup a thousand meters far below, an almost direct drop from the edge. In a northwest corner of the valley, the little town of Pedro Sanchez was a punctuation of black and white dots at the edge of a great forest of mahogany, while a stream of water, just a silver thread in a bed of green, twisted its course out of the forest and into the town.

To reach the plateau from Pedro Sanchez was over a day's journey to the southeast over a series of lower ridges and hills, each mile a perilous venture. And to approach Pedro Sanchez from where Julio stood guard at the other end of the tunnel, was two days' journey directly south and west in a circle over great ridges. The highest ridge of all was directly

over the tunnel, impassable on the surface, yet by the use of the tunnel Ortega had reached the plateau in exactly two hours.

The air was cool and invigorating due to the high altitude, and the sun had lost its vitality behind the western ridges.

Ortega gave no rest to his horse, for lighting a cigaret he mounted up and trotted away to the northern edge of the plateau. A narrow trail stretched due north in gradual descent from this edge through a vast timber land interspersed with royal palms and mangroves. The horse apparently scented home for it surged downward surefooted and fast.

Still descending two kilometers from the plateau, the trail widened, passing over a series of hills, and then suddenly spread out into a rich valley, a smaller counterpart of Sanchez. Ortega passed several native huts of palm sheaves clinging tenaciously to the slope. At the low, open door of one sat a fat, black woman watching an iron pot boiling over an open fire, smoking a cane pipe. She arose as he passed and shouted a greeting, but he paid no heed, continuing onward and downward.

The valley floor now lay before him, and he increased his horse's gait to a canter. Here was little cacti and bayonet. Heavy, spreading mangroves and tall cocoa-nut palms surrounded him, rearing their great limbs out of thick, green grass. Beyond a copse of mangroves, he struck a small dirt road, dividing the valley floor east and west. The Cordilleras like giant sentinels guarded the valley on all sides and peace and quiet reigned.

The road rose gradually to the top of a hill, and in the descent he permitted the horse to lope, and soon several low, palm-thatched huts came into view at the brink of a narrow, smooth running river at the very base of a high ridge. One of the huts was exceptionally large, and behind it, enclosed by a rectangular fence of mahogany saplings, was a small corral stocked with horses.

Upon nearer approach, a group of men could be seen seated upon a long bench in front of the doorway of the large hut. As Ortega cantered up, they arose as one and each in turn greeted him. He dismounted and growling out a word or two in exchange, led his horse over to the corral gate and tied the reins to one of the posts. The other men had reseated themselves and resumed their conversation.

Ortega retraced his steps in their direction and proceeded to climb a long hill leading up to another hut atop of it. One of the men of the group stopped talking and turned his head toward Ortega. He appeared to be the youngest of them all, and unlike them wore no beard. His complexion was that of ground coffee, and his face quite pleasant and boyish. A humorous twinkle lurked in his large, dusky eyes as he shouted at the back of Ortega.

"You had better throw your sombrero inside the door of El Jefe before you enter, noble Manual!"

Ortega paused, turned quickly, and was on the point of repartee, but either words failed him, or else the jocular logic of the younger bandolero impressed him. Growling incoherently, he turned about and continued his climb of the hill. A loud burst of laughter in unison from the bench floated up to him, followed by an exchange of ribaldry, causing his face to burn with anger.

It cooled when he reached the top of the hill and stood in front of the hut. Unlike the other huts at the foot of the hill, it was built of well matched mahogany logs, and was a fair replica of an American frontier cabin without the sturdy, stone chimney. The hill itself was just a great conical mound overshadowed by the high ridge, and due to the density of bushes and undergrowth almost entirely covering its slopes, the only accessible approach to the cabin was the path taken by Ortega from the corral.

Rubbing his face with the sleeve of his jacket, Ortega

stepped through the low doorway. On his left was one room, which judging from the furnishings was a dining room. A large, highly polished table stood in the center matched by other pieces of furniture, costly and in excellent condition. A collection of silver lay in shining array on a serving table in one far corner, and suspended from the crude log ceiling hung a gigantic, bronze lantern. It seemed incongruous, such a setting for a crude cabin in the hills.

Ortega had viewed such a contrast long before, but such costly comforts held no interest for him. He had not forgotten the labor attached to their creation. It was his own hands that had placed the soft, Persian rug on the rough floor at the behest of Mercedes Baptista, Ramon Natera's woman, and it was she who had ordered him here and there, changing, ever changing in the final arrangement of the other two rooms. Her whims were to be satisfied, and Ramon Natera made it his business to see that they were. Nothing had been changed during her absence.

A smile lighted Ortega's face as he remembered this or that wealthy Dominican home pillaged for the furnishings in evidence. But his smile vanished as the sound of heavy footsteps came through a closed door on his right, the second room in the cabin. He removed his sombrero with a nervous flourish of his hand, and was in the act of knocking on the door, when suddenly it was opened wide.

A great body filled the doorway.

CHAPTER VI

Standing a few inches over six feet, with great, bulging shoulders fitting almost snugly the upper framework of the doorway, Ramon Natera, bandit chieftain looked down with truculent stare at his visitor.

Some have said that Ramon Natera was black, either by hearsay or actual contact with the man. Figuratively, he was black; that is black of heart, but as to complexion, he possessed the light tan of a mulatto. His face, broad, and with an intellectual forehead was rather pleasant, yet his eyes belied the attribute. They were small, yellowish and cruel, flickering in restless intensity. He was clean shaven and dressed in spotless white khaki. Two yards of red silk embraced his waist and the pearl handle of a pistol protruded from the folds. His hair, short and kinky was shaven far back, leaving the upper forehead bald and not unlike old pig-skin. In his leathern face were deep lines that told of many hardships, making him appear beyond middle age. Withal, he was scarcely the hideous ogre so instilled in the minds of little black children.

As he stood facing Ortega, legs spread apart in heavy riding boots and arms akimbo, his cruel eyes surveyed the surprised man like a cougar watching its prey.

Suddenly, he reached forward with a grinning snarl and grasped the startled Ortega by the collar of his jacket with both hands. With slight effort he lifted him bodily off the floor, swung him swiftly in through the doorway and planted him solidly on the other side.

"Sit down my dear Manual!" he invited, his voice like the purring of a big cat, changing suddenly to anger.

"Caramba! I have been waiting for you a full day! . . . Must I, your Jefe, await your pleasure?"

Ortega shook himself, for such a sudden and violent transit from one room into another, caused a very uncomfortable tightening of his limbs.

Under the severe stare of Natera, he selected, or rather chose at random one of several upholstered chairs and sat down. He was sensible enough not to answer the bandit chieftain immediately, for past experience taught him the folly of it. He fearfully waited until those great arms had crossed themselves over the gorilla-like chest, which was favorably significant.

"Sangre de Colon—I am sorry, Jefe!" he offered, which despite the blasphemy was pitifully apologetic. "The policia patrol followed me up from Seibo, and I was forced to lead them a blind chase to the south trail."

"Carajo!" roared Natera, dropping his arms to his sides. "A 'blind chase'—huh? . . . It was more like an open chase into the Café El Toro for your favorite carta blanca—you crazy head!" He raised his right hand in a backward swing as though to strike Ortega, who flung up one arm in protection and shriveled down in his chair.

But Natera apparently changed his mind, for turning from his prospective victim with a sputter of disgust, he walked over to a heavy, flat-top desk standing at the foot of a big, four-posted bed, and ensconced himself in the swivel seat behind it.

The desk occupied the room's center, but unlike the dining room across the hallway, some effort had been made to hide the rough walls and bare roof of this room. Pieces of colored tapestry covered the walls from roof to floor, and broad strips of brown burlap were stretched taut and secured beneath the

rafters of the roof. It was ostensibly a living room and bedroom combined.

There were tables and chairs, cabinets and chests placed here and there, costly and of exquisite workmanship, and a collection of gold and silver ornaments filled one windowed cabinet. Nearby was a mission clock, swinging its great pendulum to and fro in rhythmical sound. An auction room could hardly have been more crowded or disorderly. The large bed of polished mahogany stood farther back in the room, its head against the wall. It was made up, and strangely for a bandit's lair, the white linen of sheets and pillows was immaculate. The voluminous folds of a mosquito netting hung from the rafters overhead and enclosed the four sides of the bed.

For a space, Natera glared malignantly over the desk-top at Ortega, and then produced several enormous, black cigars from a drawer. He bit savagely on the end of one and lit it while Ortega watched him, a mingling of fascination and trepidation on his evil face. The mission clock sounded the hour of five, its silver notes filling the room.

Natera enjoyed the sound for he counted the strokes between puffs of his cigar. Then he leaned forward with the semblance of a smile at the corners of his thick lips.

"Well, my brave muchacho, you are saved a beating this time for repairing that clock; so now make your report and make it pronto!"

Ortega shuffled his feet and sat erect, nervously hesitant.

"The Señora Mercedes has discovered that the Capitán Kent spends more time visiting the Canelon girl in the last month, than he does looking for you, Jefe mio. . . The Spanish consul De Gabriels too, spends much time at the Casa Alhaja."

"How did the Señora Mercedes discover that?" queried Natera, sitting erect, his yellow eyes shining.

"Why, that Cuello woman who has been living in Boca Chica for some time watches the house. . . She is working for La Señora now and sends her reports by Gregario. . . It is quite hard for her because there is a fixed patrol in the town now since Gregario fired that shot at the Americano."

"Yes, Manuel," broke in Natera, eyes glinting, "and when I get my hands on that fool Gregario, I'll wring his neck! . . . There will be no more wild shots taken at the Americano, for I alone am his vengeance! . . . Besides, I respect that Capitán Kent. . . My day is drawing close, and soon he will be sitting in that very chair of yours as my prisoner. . . No, a bullet is not good enough for the Capitán Kent. He has had his play, now I am going to have mine. . . And now, what about the other Americano, the Sargento Linell?"

"Working like a diablo in his clever disguises," replied Ortega more at ease. "He has been seen but once since Rafael Nunez entered the carcel at Fort Ozama. . . That Linell is a smart one, Jefe, and hard to watch."

Natera grunted disdainfully and puffed a moment on his cigar.

"Did the Señora Mercedes say anything more about the visits of Kent and De Gabriels to the Casa Alhaja?"

"Si, Jefe. She told Belgrade the Frenchman that it was plain that Kent is quite madly in love with the Canelon girl, and as for the consul, he does not bring her flowers all the way from La Capital almost every other night just because he is a friend."

Natera laughed, spat his cigar on the floor, and then fell to musing. Silence prevailed, augmented by the loud tick-tock staccato from the mission clock as he leaned back scanning the burlap overhead. Finally a thought seemed to strike him favorably, as grinning, he bent forward and wrote a message on a sheet of paper in front of him. Then opening the center drawer of the desk, he brought forth in the now dim

light of the room, several blue and pink tickets of the size of a franc note, joined together in one strip. He held them out toward Ortega, who arose at once.

"You will take a fresh horse, go to La Capital, and on Sunday morning take these lottery tickets to the Treasury Building and collect five thousand pesos." He laughed heartily. "There are more ways of obtaining money than robbing the rich—huh, dear Manuel? . . . Just stand in the crowd, and when my number goes up on the board, walk right up and collect."

Ortega grinned, an evident grin of understanding and accepted the tickets.

"Here also," added Natera, "is a message for the Señora Mercedes. . . . Bring it to her the first thing you do on arrival in La Capital." Rising, he leaned toward Ortega with a glint in his eyes. "And you will not waste a minute in Seibo on the way down; save your drinking 'til after your work is done. . . . On your way back, stop off at the rancho in La Palma and pay the Frenchman five hundred pesos of the lottery money for his work last month. . . . Ah, Manuel—it was our good luck that the Señora Mercedes helped him get across the border from Hínche. . . . That Belgarde is smart, just as smart as the Americanos. And by the way, he is my *teniente* now, so you will take his orders providing you tell me about them. . . . Carajo! We have some great plans, Belgarde and I. . . . But there—you have heard enough *muchacho*, so on your way, and do not fail me!"

Ortega repeated his orders and then started toward the door. He was halted at the threshold.

"Send that little Herrera up here—I want him!"

"Si, Jefe," responded Ortega readily, a pleased smile on his face. "The little rat is down at the corral."

"Well, he will not be seen around the corral after tonight," growled Natera. "Tell him to come pronto!"

Ortega acceded, chuckling and left the room.

Dusk of evening was hovering over Los Cordilleras as he trudged eagerly down the hill, joyfully anticipating the reception in store for one whom he despised. He made directly toward the group of men seated on the bench near the corral. They were a fierce looking lot with beards and mustacios predominating, dressed quite alike in loose fitting white or gray cotton trousers and camisas, and wearing the inevitable broad, straw sombrero. There was a machete or two in evidence, hanging from belts, but it was to be expected that other weapons were concealed under their clothing.

The youngest of them, the smooth shaven one who had jostled Ortega before, looked up and saw him approaching.

"Ah, noble bandoleros!" he cried. "Here is our new jefe returning from conference—General Manuel Ortega; general dirty face. Get up and salute (shoot) him!"

"Hush, Herrera!" answered one. "Look—he is coming for you!"

Ortega came up directly in front of the young jostler, a sardonic grin on his white spotted face.

"It is your turn now, sweet Herrera," he greeted. "El Jefe wants to see you pronto, and he is not feeling very good this evening—that is toward you. . . Remember the raid over at Pedro Sanchez? Well, perhaps that is why he wants to see you. . . Try throwing *your* sombrero inside the door!"

There was a general burst of laughter at this.

Herrera's face, a rather good looking mulatto face, became extremely sober as he arose at once. With no further attempt at banter, he quit the group and started up the hill.

With a course laugh, Ortega picked up a stone and tossed it at the back of Herrera. It struck the latter with some force on one shoulder.

Herrera wheeled about quickly, snarling. A glint of steel

leaped out from his waist and sped through the air like a shaft of light, straight for the breast of Ortega.

The latter dropped to the ground none too soon, as a long dagger struck the peak of his sombrero, ricochetting off the tough straw and dropping in the dirt. The other men had milled in sudden caution to a neutral corner at the far end of the bench.

Ortega's face was sickly, but with an assumed display of bravado, he stooped down with weakened knees, and picking up the dagger, tossed it back to the vexed Herrera.

"You must practice much more, amigo," called out Ortega, "but remember, I never miss!" And as the other men ran over to Herrera, a proof of whom they admired most, he walked toward the corral.

Herrera replaced the dagger in his belt, and silencing all words of sympathy and advice from his friends, turned and continued onward up the hill.

As he climbed, he was thinking deeply, eyes upon the ground. He was tired of this idle and dangerous life. He had never stolen or committed ill deeds through his own volition. It was always orders and threats, blunt, cruel and thoughtless, given by a devil. Despite an irritant temper, his attempt upon Ortega's life, if successful, would have been his first voluntary crime. He had been forced into the band, all because his uncle had been Gomez, the notorious bandit leader for it was believed he inherited that worthy's ability. He realized that in his burning desire to get away from it all, he had been very foolish in confiding such intentions to Manuel Ortega, who, proving the snake he was, had confided likewise to Ramon Natera.

From then on he had been the bearer of abuse at the hands of the bandit leader, who with Ortega were now his only enemies in the band. He admitted committing an indiscretion in bringing aid to a wounded native in the town of Pedro

Sanchez recently raided; but could he have done otherwise when the man was his cousin? Perhaps this was the reason he had been summoned by the bandit leader!

Over his meditations, Herrera had almost reached the top of the hill, when his progress was blocked by a massive body. He looked up quickly to gaze into the enraged face of Ramon Natera. The latter stood over him, eyes ablaze, and he balanced a heavy, rawhide whip in his right hand. There was no mistaking the belligerency in his attitude.

Herrera dropped back a step, more from surprise than fear, for he failed to take note of the whip.

"You wished to see me, Jefe?" he asked in even tone.

For answer, Natera reached forward with a great talon, and clutching Herrera by the scruff of the neck, held him in a viselike grip. Then raising the whip over his shoulder, brought it down with great force across the little fellow's back. His victim writhed in pain but uttered no sound.

"I saw what you tried to do to Ortega!" shouted Natera thunderously. "And I know what you did over at Pedro Sanchez; that is why I sent for you. . . So now you try to kill one of the band before you run away—huh? . . . Sangre de Cristo!" And raising the whip again he struck.

With a sweep of the hand, Herrera flashed out his dagger, but a short snap of the whip sent the gleaming weapon flying out of his hand.

"Fool! And you try to kill me too?"

Natera burst into boisterous laughter, much like the fabled ogre about to devour a tiny victim while he shook Herrera as easily as a dog will shake a rat. Then dragging the little fellow behind him, he began to descend the hill, the big whip trailing along the grass like a black snake.

He reached the foot of the hill, and as the men sitting on the bench began to disperse at his approach, he ordered them to stay.

"Here, you Tomas—go fetch a rope pronto!"

The one singled out as Tomas, ran without hesitation into the big hut and returned in a moment carrying a long, stout rope. He handed it to Natera, but the latter refused it, tightening his grip on his victim.

"No, you and Garcia, and Jose there, take this pollo over to the corral and tie him to the gate!"

The order was reluctantly obeyed. They relieved him of Herrera, whom they forcibly escorted over to the corral gate. However, there was much sympathy on their faces as they tied him to the railings.

Natera followed after them, running his whip through his hands with a malicious grin. The rest of the men moved forward in a body out of curiosity, but he waved them back.

"Carajo! . . . Keep back; time enough for you to take care of him when I am through!"

Evil glances were cast at him, but the men retreated to the doorway of the hut, where incoherent mutterings boded evil to their leader.

It was growing darker each moment and faces were almost in shadow.

Natera ordered the other three men away from the gate, and then faced Herrera.

"Now, my sweet little muchacho, milk blooded kin to the great Gomez—I salute you! And when I am through, you will have little desire to run away—that is, if you are able!" Winking suggestively, mockingly, he raised the whip high. "This is a cure for helping the enemies of Ramon Natera—a sure cure! . . . Why, before long, you would be telling the policia how to find the tunnel leading to our camp, if I left you alone! . . . Do you hear me?"

Herrera made no reply, but bravely raised his head and spat into his leader's face.

Came an infuriated burst of profanity, and the black whip

almost invisible in the gathering darkness descended, swishing through the air. Fully ten minutes, Natera beat the little fellow, stoic in such horrible punishment, over the body and across the face, hands and legs.

Herrera stifled the moans as he felt the great welts corrugating his body. The blows of the whip were excruciating, bringing perceptible shudders of pain. He wanted to cry; indeed, to shriek in utter abandonment over such torture, but he gritted his teeth in defiance to the leering, ugly face of the fiend before him. But now he could not see that face, for his eyes began to close as blood poured down over them, failing to quence the fire burning in them.

The blows became faster, but relief came at last when a great blackness overcame him, and he crumpled, swooning in the rope bindings.

Far up the road behind the hut, a horseman had drawn rein and turned his horse about to watch the actions of Ramon Natera. It was Manuel Ortega, and he lighted a cigaret, cocking one ear in expectation of hearing the cries for mercy of the unfortunate one. He was disappointed, for he heard only the crack of the whip, as occasionally missing its mark, struck the gate post. At last he saw Ramon Natera turn away and walk toward the hut.

Pleased at least that he had witnessed the beating of his erstwhile enemy, he wheeled his horse about and galloped away to the south.

The crumpled heap hanging upon the corral gate was very still. The face of the beaten one was hardly a face at all, for gory cuts and great welts covered it. It was a miracle if life still existed in the little body.

However, night had fully settled over the valley when Herrera stirred. Through puffed lids he was permitted a hazy glimpse of the half, yellow moon just topping a crest of the lowest peak of Los Cordilleras. Such an effort was pain-

fully difficult, but he uttered no sound. He knew that he was alone, for lantern light pouring through the doorway of the hut directly ahead, indicated that the other men were inside.

His dead weight upon the rope had loosened the fastenings, or perhaps some friend had done it, for with an agonizing effort he found himself free. As he pitched forward into the grass, one hand fell to his side and struck something round and firm. He wondered that he still maintained the sense of touch.

To his surprise, he discovered a goat skin water-bag filled to capacity upon the ground and some bread tied up in a cloth. He understood at length; an open act of charity on the part of his friends. It was a thoughtful indication also, that they wanted him to live; to leave if possible this habitation of the devil. Could he do it?

He moved his legs, and though the pain sent darts of fire through them, he was overjoyed that they could function. He drank very little of the water, spitting some of it into his hands and slapping it into his face. Then he lay down to rest.

Within an hour or two, he, Herrera, would be gone from this hell hole, thanks to the good Santa Maria, and vengeance one day would be his!

CHAPTER VII

It was Sunday morning in La Capital, and the sun though high in the azure sky was hardly torrid. The air was freshly invigorating, laden with a salty tang from the Caribbean.

A large throng of natives had assembled in front of the National Treasury directly opposite Cathedral Colon just across the park, and scanned with anxious eyes the large black-board suspended under the white colonnade. For this day, though recognized as the Sabbath, was the designated day that the official returns of the national lottery were announced to the gullible public. On the black-board would appear the winning numbers of that weekly, elusive game of chance—*Loteria Benefica*.

Some poor devil, or more surely some wealthy native would become richer by thousands of dollars, providing the fates were kind, or the revolving machine manage perhaps accidentally, to drop only those numbers possibly expected to win. But who would suspect the *Loteria* of being dishonest?

A great buzz of excitement filled the air, coming from the motley throng of plantation workers, soldiers and merchants. Rogues and gentlemen rubbed shoulders in apparent mutual interest. There was little traffic in the streets. *Parque Colon* was flanked by unhired *coches*, but an occasional burro with its barelegged rider passed by, and several automobiles could be seen.

The portals of Cathedral Colon had opened wide and many attendants of late mass hurried out into the sunlight. They were attired in their very best, especially the women, black clothes prevailing and the styles modishly American. There

was a touch of old Spain however noticeable in a few of the elite. Resplendent mantillas of bright hues draped several elderly women's heads and shoulders, while one or two shining black beavers bobbed among the flat straws and Panamas of the men.

Most of the men crossed the park and joined the throng of inveterate gamblers in front of the Treasury, drawn either by curiosity or necessity.

At last, within the white stone building, the winning numbers evidently had been chosen, for the crowd became agitated and milled under the black-board. Several officials came out of the building carrying pieces of white chalk. They climbed a ladder to a narrow, wooden platform running full length at the lower edge of the black-board. Conversation in the crowd ceased almost instantly, somewhat as though in awe as the officials plied their chalk on the face of the black-board.

Mixing in the crowd was the quaint figure of an elderly sugar cane worker in dirt stained, white camisa and tattered, gray cotton pantaloons reaching down to his bare ankles. His face was gnarled and weather beaten and almost completely covered by an iron gray beard and moustache streaked with tobacco juice; his skin the color of polished mahogany. At his side was a servicable machete thrust through a broad waist swathing of light blue cotton, and he leaned on a long staff of rough mahogany. Thus stood Captain Philip Kent in such disguise, and the character he portrayed was consummately perfect in every detail, his skin coloring the most outstanding.

He blended well in the crowd, feeling entirely secure, for he had lived too long in this little country of uncertainty to overlook details. His eyes almost hidden beneath a battered straw sombrero, roved in casual manner from face to face of those about him, for he was searching, searching for a familiar face. He smiled in amusement as he recognized many in-

fluent men craning their collared necks to see the numbers, for he knew the lottery made no choice of victims.

He had completed his survey of the crowd when suddenly pandemonium reigned. Hisses, curses, and some loud shouts of joy mixed in discordant clamor—the lottery numbers were being compared. Several natives moved toward the Treasury door, evidently winners, but the great majority of the crowd with much tearing up of lottery tickets began to disperse.

Suddenly a big man pushed his way through the remainder of the crowd, and Kent obtained a fleeting glimpse of his face as he brushed by and entered the building. It was scarcely a satisfying glance, yet it was sufficient for Kent to note a great, livid scar on one side of the man's face.

"Manuel Ortega!" he murmured under his breath.

His eyes brightened as he watched the bandit through the plate glass window of the Treasury.

Ortega walked boldly up to the cashier's counter and presented a strip of tickets to the clerk behind it. The tickets were accepted and much currency was counted out to him, green and yellow bills from the United States.

Kent smiled deeply. So Ramon Natera had set his puppet strings working to the point of winning a capital prize? . . . To what extent did the bandit leader's friendship lead? But Kent had little time for meditation, for Ortega stuffed the money in his pockets, and proceeded to leave the Treasury by a rear door.

Kent turned away from the window, and walking quickly but in hobbling fashion along the colonnade, turned the corner of the building and crossed the Calle Separacion.

He had just posted himself to a point of vantage on the opposite sidewalk in a diagonal position from the rear of the Treasury, when the broad, iron gate of the alleyway swung open and Ortega stepped into the street. The bandit looked

neither to right or left, but proceeded at a brisk walk down the street toward the public market.

Kent lit a long, inferior looking cigar and hobbled after him at discreet distance. He was elated over his good fortune of spotting Ortega, for he knew that trailing the man would surely result in obtaining important clues, clues that would materialize in Ramon Natera's undoing.

At the corner of the Calles Separacion and General Lupon, Ortega tarried a moment and consulted a slip of paper. He then bent his steps up the Calle General Lupon.

Kent reached the spot and waited until his quarry had proceeded up the winding, inclined street for a distance over two hundred yards on the left side, and then crossed to the opposite side, following at a much slower gait.

The Calle General Lupon unlike the broader, cleaner, and well laid Separacion, was narrow, unpaved, hopelessly dirty and a virtual hill. It twisted upward, bordered on either side by squat, filthy looking houses of adobe packed closely together.

Ortega climbed upward and onward until he reached the top of the street, where he entered a house directly opposite an inconspicuous drinking establishment with a propitiating sign over its single, plate glass window—El Café Machete.

Kent knew only too well this section of the city, its own tenderloin, the Villa Barahona. Here was the spawning ground of vice and crime and there existed organized gangs of thieves and criminals and houses of ill repute.

Because of the close proximity of the Café Machete and the house entered by Ortega, he availed himself of that haven and entered the establishment. His long walking stick tapped the cement floor with each labored step as he approached a table in one corner not far from the door. Here he chose his seat, for it afforded him an excellent view of the house across the street.

He leaned his stick against another chair, and to the solicitations of a greasy, black attendant ordered a bottle of Cerveza Globo. He poured out half a glass of the beer, sipping it slowly as he had seen many old natives do, whiling the time away. Not once however did his gaze leave the house he was watching.

There were several natives in the café and they were assembled at the far end of the room, their voices raised in excited ejaculations over a game of dice.

Unlike most of the houses along the street, the one he watched had two floors, each with two windows. The lower ones were closed with heavy shutters but the upper two were open to the sunlight. The Café Machete boasted of the only window of glass along the entire street.

As Kent elevated his gaze to the upper windows, he saw Manuel Ortega framed in one of them, seated with head and shoulders exposed to view. Then to his surprise a woman appeared in the other window and sat down facing Ortega. For a moment he was not sure, but when the woman glanced down into the street he recognized her beautiful, white face.

Mercedes Baptista! What scheme was she engineering for Ramon Natera?

But his thoughts were rudely interrupted by the appearance of a stranger close to his elbow. He glanced up quickly, and the face that looked down gripped him strangely. It was a face once seen would never be forgotten. It was a French face, typically Gascon and with a sharp Van Dyke beard trimmed to a point, was a fair resemblance to Mephistopheles.

Kent betrayed no surprise, but his thoughts swiftly carried him back to Port-au-Prince, where seven years ago he had been an officer in the Gendarmerie de Haiti during a detachment from the American marines. And just before his transfer to Santo Domingo, he had been instrumental in capturing and sending to jail one, Cadeus Belgrade, a notorious Voodoo doc-

tor. The man had been a renegade from a French colonial regiment and had escaped to Haiti where he practiced Voodoo witchcraft in a northern province of the Black Republic.

And now standing over him was the same Belgrade, who according to reports was serving his sentence in the native prison in Port-au-Prince. The Frenchman's face showed little change; there were streaks of gray in the beard, and the eyes though dark and penetrating were dimmed by advancing years, while the broad forehead and bronzed face were lined with evident suffering. He wore a white flannel suit and a large Panama hat was tilted back on his gray head.

Kent was thinking fast. Would his disguise deceive this renegade from hell, whose intelligence was of exceptional calibre? . . . How had he escaped from prison, and what was he doing in Santo Domingo? . . . Undoubtedly he was the Frenchman referred to in Rafael Nunez's letter to Ramon Natera!

Belgrade's eyes bored Kent through and through, and then with an enigmatic smile he pulled up another chair and sat down directly in front of him.

Kent folded his arms in such a manner as to enable his right hand to slide inside his loose camisa and touch the stock of his automatic under his left armpit.

"Buenas dias, Señor," greeted Belgrade affably in faultless Spanish with the merest trace of nasal accent. "Are you a stranger here?"

Kent instantly decided to adopt the evasive hospitality and taciturnity so characteristic in elderly natives, for a lengthy conversation would permit the Frenchman too much study of his disguise.

"No, hombre—I am no stranger here! . . . If you think me a stranger so be it: I wish to be left alone!" He thrust his face in his glass of beer and hunched his shoulders, observing that his right hand was being watched.

Belgrade arched his heavy eyebrows perplexingly, and sat for a moment studying his vis-a-vis, seemingly intent on penetrating the heavy, white beard and darkened face of such a strange old man.

At length he arose and pushed back his chair. There was a gleam of intelligence in his beady eyes and the pointed beard seemed to bristle.

"Carajo!" he exclaimed vehemently. "Old men like you should be fed to the sharks! . . . Go straight to hell; that is the best I can wish you, yet even the sharks would turn up their snouts at eating you—you old frog!"

For effect, Kent reached for his walking stick and raised it threateningly, grumbling—"caramba!" But Belgrade turned away and walking to the bar called for whiskey. He drank three glasses in rapidly, almost exultantly succession, paid his fare, and with a disdainful glance to Kent passed out into the street.

Kent was glad that the gamblers at the far end of the room had been making too much noise to take note of the altercation.

Through the big window he saw Belgrade pause at the curbstone, then cross the street and enter the house he had been watching. That move satisfied his curiosity that the Frenchman was in liaison with Ramon Natera; it was to be expected. However, this made him suspicious, for Belgrade was by far too clever to thusly expose himself to an enemy, unless his disguise had surely deceived him, and he felt sure it had. This new addition to the Natera band loomed up as a portentous cloud, insidious and complex. It was a problem now to decide which man was worth trailing, Manuel Ortega, or Cadeus Belgrade?

Raising what remained of the beer to his lips, he scanned the windows above and was surprised to discover that Ortega and Mercedes had disappeared.

Not caring to quit his place of vantage, he was on the point of ordering another bottle of beer, when Ortega appeared in the doorway below. The scar-faced one lit a cigaret and then strode off down the street on the opposite side of the hill.

Kent arose at once, called the attendant and paid his fare. Then reaching for his walking stick, he stumped out into the street, and taking no notice of the house across the way, followed slowly in the direction taken by Ortega.

The latter was in no hurry but descended the hill in leisurely fashion, making it quite difficult for Kent to avoid passing him.

At a point where several pedestrians crowded the way, Ortega crossed to Kent's side of the hill near a narrow alleyway. Kent was well acquainted with the alleyway; a veritable cañon cut through houses and high walled patios, dark, filthy, and dangerous to strangers. A life was held cheaply in its dark recesses, and should he arouse Ortega's suspicions at this point, a cry from the latter would bring many cut-throats immediately to his aid.

About half way between him and Ortega, three well dressed natives came out of a house and walked hurriedly down the hill. Ortega had already passed the alleyway, but the trio on reaching it, turned in and disappeared.

"On the way to a cock fight," thought Kent, increasing his gait slightly, his walking stick striking the sidewalk in cadence with his step. But just as he reached the alleyway, suddenly, forcibly came a warning thought. Manuel Ortega was going no place particularly, and was glancing furtively over his shoulder!

His right hand darted inside his camisa and grasped his automatic as milling shadows fell across his path from the entrance to the alleyway. He blessed the sun high overhead for that, and tossing away his walking stick, his automatic flashed in his hand as he crouched down and awaited the at-

tack. But the shadows from the alleyway now were motionless; the attack came from the rear.

Cadeus Belgrade crept out of a doorway almost at the very corner of the alleyway. He moved forward noiselessly just three steps, and raising a heavy club high, brought it down with much force on Kent's head. It was a powerful blow, a battered sombrero offering but little protection.

Dazzling red flashes overwhelmed Kent's brain and then he was engulfed in darkness. His pistol exploded twice, a spasmodic endeavor, and the leaden slugs sped into the alleyway as the shadows scattered. As he crumpled down on the sidewalk, Manuel Ortega came running back up the hill.

"Sacre, le diable!" exclaimed Cadeus Belgrade bending over Kent. "Have I killed him?"

Ortega approaching heard the words.

"If you have killed him, Cadeus, the Jefe will be loco!"

Belgrade scowled angrily.

"Carajo! To hell with Natera! . . . What sort of a game is he playing? This Americano is safe only like he is!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Casa Alhaja and its surroundings was a refreshed picture, seeming to have been touched here and there by thoughtful, loving hands. The broad portico shone in the sunlight with its new coat of white paint, and surrounding it was an even row of transplanted Spanish bayonet. Beds of flowers in verigated colors bordered the white coral pathway from the portico steps to the iron gate, and the great mango tree in the center of the green lawn bore fruit, hanging temptingly suspended, red and yellow within reach of hands. And in the patio, the trellis work enclosing it was completely covered with creeping vines.

Aunt Señora Combasa knelt by the side of the pathway and plied a garden trowel in the dark earth of the garden. An apron of cretonne protected her dress of white linen and her face was almost entirely hidden under a broad rimmed, white canvas hat.

She had not heard the iron gate swing open, nor was she aware of the presence of an intruder until a shadow fell across the bed of flowers. She looked up quickly with cold, austere mien into the face of a young white woman holding an infant child in her arms.

"Como está Usted?" saluted the woman politely, gathering the child closer to her breast. "I should like to see the Señorita Juanita Canelon."

Aunt Combasa dropped her trowel and stood up. She studied the woman severely for a moment, noting the beauty of her. Shining, raven hair was tucked under a brown silk hat, blending well with a dress of yellow pongee. She was

pure white, her skin smooth and her cheeks tinged with pink, while her eyes, great black orbs held a soft light under a high, intelligent forehead. Her features were well moulded, almost classic in detail, and her form lithe and well proportioned.

The child, too, was white with a little round, black pate nestling under the woman's chin, and it clung tenaciously to her breast with a chubby little fist.

Aunt Combasa was hardly pleased or satisfied in her close scrutiny, identifying her as a Latin, but noted that she was above the middle class of natives and evidently well educated.

"Come into the house, Señora," she invited at length in luke warm tone.

The stranger followed her up the pathway and into the house.

Escorting her to a chair in the reception room, Aunt Combasa returned to the portico, and leaning against the railing called out in the general direction of the patio.

"Juanita, niña . . . Come into the house—there is a visitor!"

A girlish response came from the patio and Aunt Combasa joined the visitor.

She had just sat down facing the woman across the marble topped table in the center of the room when Juanita came quickly into the room humming an aria from Lucia. She ceased at the top of a scale and stepping to the side of Aunt Combasa waited politely. She was bareheaded and wore a flowered gown, and the tropic sun had already tanned her fair skin. The color to her cheeks had deepened and her eyes shone with the health of youth.

There was unfeigned admiration in the eyes of the visitor as she viewed such girlish beauty.

Aunt Combasa arose at once and took one step toward her.

"This is the Señorita Juanita, Señora—will you honor me with your name?"

Their visitor did not rise, but glanced down at the child, then to Juanita and back to Aunt Combasa, evident temerity in her manner.

"I am Rosa Ascuncion, Señora, yet what I have to say is for the ears of the Señorita Juanita only, if you will pardon me?"

Juanita acknowledged the introduction with a bow of her pretty head, but Aunt Combasa's thin lips tightened, her chin stiffened, and her noble face darkened.

"That is a presumption, I am sure Señora Ascuncion, since the Señorita is indirectly under my charge. . . Plainly, you are a stranger to us, and we are new in Dominicana."

Rosa Ascuncion's big eyes betrayed a furtive light, almost malicious.

"You are quite right Señora—I am a stranger, and I have a strange story to tell. . . Perhaps the Señorita has a mind of her own." She centered her eyes on Juanita. "I request only a few minutes of your time my dear; will you ask your dutiful duenna to leave us alone?" . . .

"I am not her duenna, Señora!" broke in Aunt Combasa indignantly. "I am her aunt!"

Juanita smiled over the mistake of identity. To her there was an air of mystery about this stranger and her child which fired her curiosity. She respected her aunt's judgment in all things, but she could see no harm in a short interview alone with the woman.

Placing one hand on Aunt Combasa's shoulder, she smiled appealingly.

"Dear Tiá, I do respect your wishes, but if the Señora Ascuncion wants to interview me alone, pray let her do so. . . However, you will remain near at hand, won't you?"

Aunt Combasa's look was condescending.

"Very well Juanita, have your way. . . I shall remain nearby and will come when you call." And bestowing a frigid

glance at Rosa Ascuncion, she swept out of the room.

Juanita drew up a chair quite close and said calmly, "You may proceed Señora?"

The latter appeared to hesitate, apparently impressed by the unsophisticated freshness of the Spanish girl. But presently, after her gaze had shifted around the big room and returned to Juanita's face, she spoke.

"First, I must tell you querida, that I weighed all manner and means for a solution to my trouble before I mustered sufficient courage to come directly to you." Her voice was low and rather troubled, and only once did she lift her eyes from the child in her lap, to find that Juanita regarded her quizzically. "You are acquainted with the Capitán Felipe Kent, the Americano?" she asked.

Juanita somewhat surprised at the sudden question, acceded readily.

"Well, it was because of his self-confessed love for you that as a last resort I came directly to you to appeal to your womanhood to help me out."

Juanita straightened up stiffly in her chair and confusion showed in her countenance.

"Why, my good woman, your statement is rather confusing! . . . Will you kindly be more explicit?"

Rosa Ascuncion glanced up again, a rather gentle smile improving somewhat the strain on her handsome face. The child stirred and thrust out its little hand.

"Yes, I know it must be confusing to you, innocent and beautiful girl that you are, so I shall avoid a great deal of detail. . . . The Capitán Kent and I have known each other a very long time, and of course such an association as ours in a far away place like Dominicana reached the closest stage of intimacy. . . . Candidly, I can say that at one time I loved him with such a love that any real woman showers on her choice. Such a love however was a greedy love—foolish girl

that I was; but I believed the affection was mutual. . . And now that he has deserted me, you, and you alone can make him realize his duty!"

The red glow in Juanita's cheeks faded, and the emotion surging within caused her heart to beat heavily.

Rosa Ascuncion cuddled the child and assumed a humble attitude, while Juanita found difficulty in speaking, for dryness assailed her throat.

"I, . . . I am really overwhelmed, Señora!" she managed to say. "To connect the good Capitán Kent with any misfortune of yours is quite beyond my comprehension, unless" . . .

Rosa Ascuncion raised her head quickly and noted Juanita's troubled and pathetic face. Her chin became rigidly stern however and her voice unduly harsh.

"Unless—to save you further mystery . . . this baby I hold in my lap is the son of Felipe Kent, and I am its mother!"

Juanita arose mechanically, unsteadily, and her dark eyes were staring widely.

"You mean . . . that Felipe—the Capitán Felipe Kent, is . . . your husband?"

"Ah, no dear girl! Madre Dios, would that he were!"

Juanita choked the violent emotion threatening to consume her. She studied the woman bravely for a space, standing erect.

"And you expect me, a very close friend to El Capitán, to believe your lurid story, Señora?"

A sardonic grin twisted the corners of Rosa Ascuncion's lips, and she shrugged her well rounded shoulders in an effort of indifference.

"Perhaps it has a lurid sound, Señorita, but nevertheless is decidedly true. . . . I have known El Capitán much longer than you; yes, in fact three whole years. Are you so gullible

to imagine that you are the only woman in his life? . . . Americanos are all that way! They come and they go, leaving their women where they find them. And because I come to you with his child . . . you the woman whom he adores, and ask you in the interest of fair play to prevail upon him to return to me, you are amazed . . . my story is lurid, and you believe me not!" She read disgust in Juanita's lowered gaze.

For in that gaze, Juanita saw a delusive face, effectively bold. She did not believe the woman; she did not want to believe her—and yet? With a slight, pitiful cry of humiliation, perhaps subjugation, she turned away and fled from the room.

Haunted by a cruel thought, she passed swiftly up the circular stairway leading to her boudoir. She failed to observe Aunt Combasa, face aflame, enter the reception room with vigorous steps.

Passing into her pretty, little retreat, she threw herself on the soft bed near the front window and buried her face in the downy white pillow.

"Oh, Felipe!" she sobbed. "Forgive me for my weakness of mind—for it cannot be true! . . . You are so good!"

Her sobs grew fainter and then died out as she whispered a prayer.

Aunt Combasa walked silently into the room and approached the bed.

"Juanita, niña hermosa?"

Tear stained eyes were raised to the elder woman as she gathered her niece tenderly in her arms and kissed the white forehead.

"Oh, Tía," interjected Juanita, "did you hear the accusation of that woman?"

"Yes, dear, I heard all, but awaited your call. . . . You realize now perhaps why I did not care to leave you alone with her; just an old woman's intuition. . . . I sent her away. Of course you did not believe her story?"

"No, no dear Tiá! At first misgivings overcame intelligent thinking and I was greatly upset. . . Why I ran from her I do not know, unless" . . .

"Unless," interrupted Aunt Combasa, holding her niece's gaze, "unless Felipe Kent means more to you than just a friend. . . You love the Americano don't you?"

Juanita's face flushed with color and she hid it in her aunt's shoulder. Then her arm stole around the loving old lady's neck, and raising her lips to a neighborly ear whispered a confession.

Aunt Combasa patted Juanita's warm cheek and her gray eyes held a soft light.

At that moment a slight knock sounded on the open door of the bedroom.

Aunt Combasa turned an inquiring face in that direction.

"Come, Juanita, here is your father!" she said quietly.

Juanita looked over her aunt's shoulder and saw her father framed in the doorway, evidently just come from the street. Surprise was written on his lean, but now ruddy face. He was quite changed following his convalescence. His tall, spare frame had filled out and his gray eyes shone with renewed vigor.

"May I come in, hermana?" he asked, concern in his tone.

Aunt Combasa nodded, and Juanita leaping from the bed ran to him and encircled her arms about his neck.

"Padre! I am glad you have come!"

The old don kissed her on either cheek.

"Why, 'Nita, you have been crying!" he said gravely, holding up her rounded chin. He glanced over to his sister.

"What is it all about, hermana?"

Juanita said nothing but went directly to her dresser and proceeded to tidy herself.

The sister drew her brother to one side and enlightened him.

"It can mean but one thing," he confided. "It is a sinister

plot laid by no other than Ramon Natera. . . Just another attempt of that bandolero to hurt not only me and mine, but to sully the name of our dear friend, the Capitán Kent. And this is undoubtedly but part of his plot. . . To what end will he not resort in his feud!"

"Perhaps, Reynaldo," suggested his sister, "it would do well to acquaint Felipe with this episode. He should be told at least about the Ascuncion woman, which would aid him in uncovering some deeper plot."

Señor Canelon shook his head gravely and his face became more serious than ever. He called to Juanita, who joined him immediately.

"My dear ones," he said solemnly, "I have very, very bad news. . . The sargento in charge of the policia patrol brought me a message from the Secretario Morales in La Capital. . . Our dear friend Felipe Kent has disappeared!"

"Disappeared?" cried both women in astonishment.

"Just that," reiterated Señor Canelon, soberly. "He has been missing from Policia Headquarters four days. . . He not only failed an appointment with Morales, but left the Sargento stranded alone at an important rendezvous. . . and now it is assumed." . . Here he paused, clearing his throat; and drawing the trembling Juanita to him, went on, huskily—

"My dear child . . . they fear he is either a prisoner of Ramon Natera, or" . . . he stopped.

Juanita, suddenly white, eyes wide, body swaying, clutched her father's arm. "Dead?" she whispered.

Señor Canelon nodded slowly, painfully.

Faithful Aunt Combasa turned swiftly, but a moment too late, for the girl had dropped like a soft pillow at her feet.

CHAPTER IX

J. Fernandez de Gabriels motored over to the Casa Alhaja in the early evening, and was manifestly concerned when told of the sudden disappearance of Philip Kent. Ever optimistic however, and with clever anecdotes, he soon put the company in very good humor; Juanita the last to succumb.

"For, my dear friends," he said, "worrying will never bring the good Capitán out of danger. . . . Cierito, I look for him to come tumbling in on us anytime! . . . He knows this little country better than any of us, and is a match for a dozen Nateras."

Juanita smiled at him for his appreciation of Kent, and when Aunt Combasa and her father sat down in a cozy little corner for a game of kings, she and the consul joined them to watch over their shoulders. There was much banter as the game progressed until the two players gave more attention to their cards.

Then De Gabriels slipped away, and reaching the broad doorway beckoned to Juanita. She quit the table unobserved and crossed the room under the great oil lamp, a sparkling figure in a gown of black tulle and tiny spangles. Admiration shone in the consul's eyes as she approached him.

"Come out in the patio, Juanita," he whispered, "I have something of great importance to tell you!"

Juanita caught up a gorgeous, red Spanish shawl draped over a nearby divan, and placing it about her shoulders, followed him outside.

A full silver moon shone down on the patio, casting a sheen over grass and shrubbery. The Caribbean rolled its surf in

booming decrescendos along the beach and a light breeze caressed the palm trees across the road.

De Gabriels guided her at once to the vine covered arbor where they sat down. An hour passed while they talked of Spain, reminiscing over their youthful pursuits; holidays at home and fiestas. Madrid! . . . To be sure; dancing, dazzling señoritas whirling to the clicking of castenets! . . . And Seville? Ah, nights like this; strumming guitars and wine glasses tinkling, held by gay, young dons offering their toasts with fierce, amorous glances!

But then De Gabriels suddenly became serious, remembering no doubt that his mission to the patio was for an understood purpose. Apparently he was reticent, seemingly bent on working up to his subject. Beginning with retrospective comparisons to his former visits to Alhaja, and resorting to clever diplomacy, he described Juanita's attitude toward him.

Juanita listened in quiet deference, hiding her face beneath the shadow of the cherimoya tree bending its branches over the top of the arbor, until he became so critical that she rallied to her defence.

"Don't say that I am entirely wrapped up in myself, Juan. . . . The company of dear Aunt Combasa, the nearness of padre, and your regular visits make Boca Chica a happy little world for me, unless" . . .

"Yes, Juanita," he broke in shortly, "unless I eventually break down your cool reserve with a stolen kiss; receive perhaps a slap on the cheek, and then take the precaution of asking you to marry me before I try it again."

"Why, Juan De Gabriels, I believe you have fallen victim to the fever, or else this heavenly night makes you sentimental!"

"Si, niña hermosa! . . . Perhaps it is the moon, the fragrance of the cherimoya blossoms, or the very romance of the night

itself that urges me to confess I love you! It is not an ephemeral impulse, and hardly the fever of the tropics gone to my head! . . . I loved you that last day on the deck of the steamer, and it smote me forcibly as I waved adiós to you from the river dock! . . . Your beautiful face is before me constantly, and the heat of day troubles me not, thinking of you!

"Tell me, querida? Tell me that I have the right to hold you so tenderly in my thoughts; that my love is not hopeless?" He reached over from his seat and touched the soft, warm hands in her lap.

Juanita, tense in the shadow, raised her hands from contact with his and edged away from him slightly. Her reply was not immediate for she was obviously distracted. When at last she spoke, her voice was low and somewhat shaken.

"Juan, you have been a kind, dear friend, and your attentions have greatly minimized the strain of loneliness for me in this strange little country . . . but you take my breath away. . . . I find it very hard to say the right thing, Juan. . . . I had thought our friendship a delightful thing—not in the least sentimental. But now? . . . Oh! What can I say that will make you understand, without hurting you, amigo?" she wound up miserably.

De Gabriels squared his shoulders, and his voice was well under control when he replied.

"I am glad that you are truthful Juanita, and I feel deeply the disappointment that my confession has been untimely, yet—will you not assure me that one day you might be willingly responsive to my plea?"

Juanita sighed deeply.

"Ah, Juan—that is a trust no woman can truthfully give to any man! We are the puppets of destiny, and that giant sneers at promises. And well he might, for he knows love is just around the corner. . . . To a woman, love creeps into her

heart; tender, mysterious, and irresistibly she answers its call, responsive to the man creating it, either in blindness or judgment, yet bravely truthful with herself and fair to him!"

De Gabriels sat quietly pensive as though weighing such a colorful dissertation. Came his reply however, slow and deliberate, with a touch of the sardonic in its tone.

"There is but one answer to that, Juanita! It is plain admission that I am a wretched Don Juan—though I bear the name. . . However, you have committed yourself, for you reflect experience in your enthusiasm. You speak of a woman's fairness to a man! . . . Have you been as fair to the Capitán Kent, as you have to me? Or, perhaps the Americano makes love better than I!"

Such a sudden, forceful innuendo could do nothing less than bewilder Juanita; stifle her with resentment and anger. But the consul was spared the caustic retort on her lips, when a twig snapped somewhere.

Without warning, swift shadows crowded into the arbor, and dark, threatening figures surrounded the alarmed pair. So sudden was their appearance and prepared their errand that Juanita, shocked into speechlessness, found herself pinioned from behind by brutishly strong hands. When she thought to scream, it was too late. A silk handkerchief was thrust into her mouth and secured by a light scarf tied behind her neck.

De Gabriels, though he struggled madly was treated to the same ceremony, and in addition was thrown roughly against the trellis and bound to it by a stout cord.

"Pronto, Tomás!" cried a woman's voice. "Leave the Spaniard tied where he is and help Antonio and José carry the girl to the automobile—she kicks like a mula!"

Indeed, Juanita was using her feet to good advantage and there were grunts of pain as cotton pantaloons proved poor protection to frail shins. However, her feet were secured and

she was carried bodily out of the arbor. De Gabriels was left alone.

By the full light of the moon the raiders were exposed; four men and one woman, carrying Juanita in great haste across the patio, down the garden path and into the road. The lights from Alhaja glowed softly yellow, and either Aunt Combasa and her brother were too engrossed in their game of cards to investigate the prolonged absence of Juanita and Gabriels, or they were purposely disposed to grant the younger people an uninterrupted evening in the patio.

Juanita, gazing helplessly at the lights in the windows, was carried a few rods down the road, past De Gabriels' high powered motor car parked near the gate, and placed in another car, a heavy, enclosed touring type, standing without lights under a giant palm tree.

"Place her securely between you, hombres!" ordered the woman, evidently in command of the raiders. "And make sure that she does not slip her gag." She then turned to the fourth man standing in the road at her shoulder. "Start the engine, Tomás, and do not spoil our good luck by lingering too long. . . La Palma is a good way off, and that policia patrol will be along presently."

Tomás, a tall, smooth shaven blackman pointed in the direction of De Gabriels' car.

"Don't you want me to fix the Spaniard's engine, Señora; the policia might use it?"

"No, Tomás! Pronto—start the engine; we must hurry!"

Tomás hastened to obey as the woman climbed into a seat beside the steering wheel. With a few turns of the crank the engine roared and he took his place at the wheel.

But before he released the brakes, the distinct figure of a man dressed in beggarly clothing, darted out from behind the giant palm tree, and running swiftly, body bent low, to the rear end of the car, he climbed up on the two, big rubber tires

lashed there. Squeezing down he settled himself securely on the rims, extending his arms on the sides and permitting his legs to dangle almost in the road. Veritably he was wedged there.

With a jolt the car shot forward, bumping along with great speed, climbed the hill overlooking the sea, and turning to the right sped along the Marcoris Highway. It proceeded for some time along the hard, broad road, swept through the town of La Borda flickering with lights, and reached La Redona five miles beyond. It continued through the larger town without obstruction, although narrowly missing collision with a stray burro in its nocturnal promenade along the road.

The man on the tires clung with tenacity to his precarious position, expecting at every jolt to be catapulted off.

An hour passed and the moon soared high, exposing countless palm trees scattered over open countryside. A long, crooked fence of wire, broken in places by wooden cross-bars swept past, as it twisted and turned with the course of the road; now quite close and then far away. Acres upon acres of sugar cane seemed endless; great masses of it waving slender arms to the stars.

No other towns were encountered until the car reached the outskirts of Honduras, its lights dancing like will-o-the-wisps in the distance, and turning sharply to the left at a cross-road, continued along a thoroughfare almost as broad as the highway itself.

Another hour passed and then the road began a gradual ascent going due north. More sugar cane rushed into view parallel with the road and not a sign of habitation or settlement was visible until the Province of Seibo was reached where the sugar cane was finally lost. Here the road became steeper and began to lessen in width, bordered by grassy hills.

A mile or two beyond the scattered town of Los Chicharones, the car left the road and negotiated a rough, narrow

trail to the right. Its speed was reduced considerably, breaking its way through spiny undergrowth. Faint lines of massive hills could be seen as the trail swung again to the north, growing larger as the car labored up and up.

Five miles farther on the car virtually crawled along until it entered Mata de La Palma, a wretched little town nestling at the foot of a massive hill, where the trail broadened somewhat and progress became less arduous.

La Palma was simply a secluded spot, crowded with thatched huts, where faint, little flickering lights punctuated the darkness; yellow dots on a canvas of black. It was a dwelling place of charcoal burners, filthy and primitive. Enormous charcoal pits abounded with steaming, pungent smoke ascending in little spirals from mounds darker than the night; twisting into weird, grotesque shapes. The moon was lost behind the great hills sloping up from the town, and but a single constellation of stars blinked down on the scene. Save for the crowing of a restless rooster and the chugging of the car's motor in passing through, La Palma was death-like in stillness.

The town melted in the darkness as the car came out on the trail again, and although the trail became narrower than ever, progress was on an even plane, following along the base of the biggest of the hills.

It seemed nothing short of a miracle that the man perched on the spare tires behind the car had stuck to his post, presenting quite the semblance of a fixture. And yet there was an alertness about him very noticeable as he twisted his head from left to right as though deliberating. His knees were raised higher, and he had changed his hold on the tire rims in the manner of one about to spring to the ground.

As for Juanita Canelon, wedged tightly between the men in the rear seat, gagged and helpless, she had confined herself to a positive decision that her abductors were Ramon Natera's

bandoleros, and that they were taking her away to imprisonment in the mountains. Aside from the discomfiture of the gag in her mouth and the pressing nearness of the men, she had not been molested or insulted during the long, tiresome journey. Hardly a word had been exchanged by the men except to make answer to their female leader in the front seat. Strangely, she was not afraid of the outcome despite her short knowledge of the methods of Ramon Natera; and she had made one important discovery during the course of the journey, listening to the voice of the woman in front; that the latter was Rosa Ascuncion, her disagreeable visitor of the morning.

This made her thoughtful, conjuring up many unpleasant conjectures. Once she smiled however when she remembered how the Señor De Gabriels, as though in punishment for his irrelevant disparagement had been left tied to the trellis work of the arbor. And yet, had he touched upon the truth? . . . Could she have been as frankly fair with the Capitán Felipe as she had with him? . . . Well, Juan De Gabriels was not Felipe Kent!

The trail had completely disappeared and a great forest loomed up ahead of the car. Juanita heard the Ascuncion woman order the tall Tomás to stop the car. They were but a stone's throw from a thick palm grove, but there was not the least sign of habitation anywhere.

With the grinding of the car's brakes, the man on the spare tires dropped into the grass, and backing away, literally dove out of sight in the underbrush.

He acted none too soon, for the doors of the car swung open and the men jumped out. They lifted Juanita to the ground, and stretching their legs, lit cigarets. One of them sat down in the grass evidently to rest, but Rosa Ascuncion spying him thus, waved her hand to him to get up.

"Lazy fool! Can't you see that daylight is not far away?"

. . Take the gag out of that girl's mouth and let us be on our way!"

He obeyed with alacrity, and Juanita drank in the early morning air with evident relief.

A faint, purple haze was stealing over the palm trees, an indication of approaching dawn, but warm rain drops began to patter down out of a dark mass of clouds to the southwest.

The party moved on toward the forest with Rosa Ascuncion leading in file and Juanita in the middle. They passed through the palm grove and entered the deeper forest along a narrow path blazed by the blows of machetes. It was strewn with cocoanut husks and the fallen, dried sheaves of the palms. They rustled and crackled under footsteps as the party trudged along.

The man hiding in the underbrush close to the abandoned car showed himself. Standing erect, he waited until safe distance separated him and the group already out of sight and then he followed slowly.

Rain came down quite heavily now, bringing with it a chill, penetrating and uncomfortable. It was reduced to a mist when a few minutes later Rosa Ascuncion and her party crossed over several ceiba tree trunks placed together in the form of a crude bridge over a narrow, muddy stream of water.

The footpath now pursued a zig-zag course and soon the tired, trudging group with its lone tracker dodging behind trees entered a large clearing. At the far end of the clearing, where the forest continued on in greater density, stood a low, flat building resembling a Cuban rancho house. The palm thatch of its roof was well laid and in good condition. A small corral squared off with ceiba saplings and stocked with horses, occupied ground in a hollow a few rods away from the house. Yellow light shone out from a half closed window of a middle room, and smoke ascended from an adobe chimney on the corral side.

As the party crossed the clearing and approached the rancho, one of the horses thrust its nose over the corral fence and whinnied a sort of challenge.

A big, black mastiff dog dashed out suddenly from behind one corner of the house and bounded toward the party barking furiously. It reared up on its hind quarters directly in front of Rosa Ascuncion.

"Be still, Carlos!" she cried. "Go back to your master!"

The dog eased its body and crawled forward, wagging its long snake-like tail. She patted its big head and then proceeded onward, cautioning the others to keep close. Growling ominously, the dog followed at her side.

A tall white man was standing beneath the long shed in front of an open door of the rancho house as the party drew near.

"Is that you Cadeus?" called out Rosa Ascuncion.

"Si, Señora! I have been waiting up since midnight for you. . . Have you brought the girl?"

"Yes, Cadeus. . . Go and prepare the small room for her, and you had better leave Carlos outside; he is a good watchdog . . . spotted us the moment we entered the clearing."

Cadeus Belgrade, the Frenchman grunted with satisfaction and passed in through the open door. Rosa Ascuncion then spoke to the men.

"Bring the girl inside with me Tomás, and the rest of you get some sleep. . . Be ready to take to horses at siesta time." And with a sigh of weariness, she entered the house.

Tomás gently grasped Juanita's arm.

"Venir, Señorita," he said not unkindly. "If you are as sleepy as I am, you would be glad to come inside to rest and dry yourself."

Juanita appreciated the words of the black man, and she realized that rest would afford her time to reflect over the situation, for sleep was entirely out of the question. One

thought pervaded her mind as she followed Tomás inside; was Felipe Kent safe, or like herself, was he Ramon Natera's prisoner? She closed her eyes thinking the worst; felt a tugging at her heart strings.

The other three men had scarcely disappeared through another door at the far end of the house, when the man who had followed the party through the forest, stepped boldly into the clearing. He stood motionless a moment with the dark forest behind him, scanning the rancho, and then whispered in plain English—"Well, I'll be damned!"

CHAPTER X

With the closing of the door behind her, and the parting—"buenos dias" of Tomás ringing in her ears, Juanita Canelon by the light of a tallow candle placed on a stool near the door, made a cursory survey of the temporary prison allotted her.

Through half closed eyelids she saw a stuffy, little room, bare and cold, and containing besides the stool, a worn out leather couch placed against one wall and an earthen jar filled with water nearby. On the couch lay a blanket, folded untidily at its head, a colored weave tattered but clean.

She shivered perceptibly in the flickering candle light, for the rain that fell had made her cold and uncomfortable. Picking up the blanket and wrapping it about her, she sank down on the couch in weary abandonment.

The noises of her captors moving about in another room ceased abruptly, and the stillness that prevailed gripped her strangely. She marveled at her courage in reconciling herself so easily to the situation. She, a prisoner of Ramon Natera, far away from Boca Chica; alone and unprotected in this sinister room! She summoned her reserve energy to keep awake, but it was a losing fight. Worn out, and hopelessly drowsy she succumbed to opiate inducement and slumbered. And in her sleep Juanita dreamed.

It was night, but she was no longer in the rancho house. Pale, twinkling stars gazed down on her in the patio of the Casa Alhaja. She was waiting—yes, waiting contentedly beneath the young cherimoya tree blossoming pink and white! The sweet fragrance of the blossoms filled the air; heavy, almost pungent, stifling the salty scent of the ocean.

Felipe had been away such a long time! . . . Did he really care, or were his few visits prompted by mere friendship alone? . . . No, there had been something more in his conversation, something deeper in the blue of his eyes when he held her gaze, that impressed her deeply; She always reveled in his presence; anticipating eagerly his coming, and reluctant to have him leave—why?

The sound of the iron gate swinging back on its rusted hinges; now footsteps! . . . It was Felipe! She could not overcome the elation sweeping over her as she listened to the measured tread on the coral pathway! But then the footsteps ceased—silence, save for the booming of the surf through the palm grove! . . . Would he disappoint her?"

"Señorita! . . . Señorita Canelon!" A voice far off was calling; louder now, nearer.

It was Felipe's voice; she was sure of it!

"Señorita Canelon!"

The voice was close to her ear now. . . . Something touched her shoulder and she awoke with a start. It was a man's hand and she recoiled in fright against the wall.

"Sh! . . . Señorita!" whispered the voice. "I am the Sargento Linell . . . make no noise; we have a dog to contend with outside!"

Juanita sat bolt upright, for with such friendly, cautioning words her mind functioned normally and she recognized the voice of the Americano. The candle she had left burning was out, but the gray dawn of morning shed its slaty, dull light upon the couch through an open window directly over her head. She saw the semi-silhouetted figure close to her shoulder; a beggarly figure in ragged, native clothing and big sombrero. But for his voice she would have been terrifyingly deceived; for this was not the same, fine looking Sargento Linell who had been introduced to her recently by the Capitán Felipe.

She arose and faced him, brushing back a lock of disheveled hair.

"Sargento Linell? . . . Why, how did you know I was here, and how did you get in?"

"Speak softly Señorita—please!" he whispered. "I crawled through the window. . . . I saw all that transpired last evening in Boca Chica, and I hope you will forgive me for permitting that Mercedes Baptista and her bandoleros to steal you away from the consul"

"Mercedes Baptista?"

"Si, Señorita—Ramon Natera's mistress."

Juanita shook her head.

"Why, I knew her only as Rosa Ascuncion, Sargento. . . . has she other names?"

"Yes, many. . . . But to repeat if you will; I could have prevented your being kidnapped, but I availed myself of the opportunity to trail them here in vague hope of finding" . . .

"Felipe—Capitán Felipe, amigo!" Juanita interjected spasmodically. "But did you not find him?"

There was a ring of disappointment in Frank Linell's reply.

"No! . . . I looked into every room in the rancho; this room was the last, and I was glad to get inside, for their watch-dog came near spotting me. Fortunately a breeze was blowing my way and it failed to get my scent. . . . Not finding El Capitán here, leaves but one explanation to his continued absence. . . . I fear that he is"

Juanita reached forward and grasped his hand.

"Pray do not say the worst, Sargento! In fact, it is not characteristic of you Americanos to resign yourselves so quickly in the face of odds. . . . Besides, I have an intuitive feeling that El Capitán is in no grave danger; perhaps he is better off than we think. . . . Perhaps he like yourself, is awaiting this move—my kidnapping. . . . This sounds silly I know, but at least it is a remedy for pessimism."

Linell pressed her hand firmly to indicate his approval.

"It is a pleasure to hear a woman talk like that, and I feel very small in using you as a decoy for the bandoleros to show me the way to their rendezvous here."

Juanita came near forgetting to whisper in emphasizing her rejoinder.

"Ease your mind Sargento. . . You did me a great service last evening, but for obvious reasons I want you to spare me an explanation. . . As for being used as a decoy, I would have consented anyway had you asked me. Do you realize how much the Canelons owe you and the Capitán Felipe?"

"It was extremely exacting of me, nevertheless, Señorita," replied Linell softly, "but I should never have allowed the escapade if I did not feel that I was capable of protecting you constantly. . . Now that it has proven a fiasco, it is my duty to get you safely back to La Capital, or at least to Marcoris."

"And what will be your plans after that, Sargento?"

"No plans, but a wild, rash endeavor; to locate the lair of Ramon Natera somewhere in Los Cordilleras. There only shall I find out the truth about El Capitán."

"But the policia; they will help you out . . . and may I do something?"

Linell shook his head.

"No; we have asked for coöperation from the policia too many times, to expect it now. We have always been forced to work alone, both as investigators and a two-man army. . . The Capitán Kent could clean out the mountains of a dozen Nateras if the Secretario Morales would give him one battalion of policia; but there is always the excuse that such a forced attack would incite the natives and bring on a revolution. . . ridiculous! . . The real excuse is the cost of campaigning; the loss of such a man as Kent means very little to the Government!

"As for help from you Señorita, which offer I appreciate

greatly, you will be of great aid to me by returning to Marcoris and safety. . . Assured of your safety, will permit me an unimpaired plan of action."

Juanita was sensible enough not to protest his common sense decision.

"Very well Sargento . . . Perhaps too, keeping silent over my kidnapping will aid you also?"

"Very much, amiga; and it would be best that you remain in Marcoris a day or two. . . Now we must go, for the sun will soon top the ridges."

With no further comment, he grasped her arm gently and guided her to the open window. Reaching up to the sill, he drew himself upon it, and bracing against the frame held down his hands to her.

Juanita needed no bidding, but raised her hands to his. With a display of great strength, he drew her up from the floor bodily to his side, and cautioning her to maintain a secure hold, he dropped lightly to the ground outside.

He discovered that the height of the sill from where he stood was much greater than on the inside, making it impossible to reach up to the girl. He paused a moment to survey the entire clearing. A pinkish tint was already evidenced in the gray and blue of the sky, heralding the rising sun. The corral was silent; the horses, some standing and one or two lying against the fence offered him no greeting, and he cocked an ear to one side, hoping the watch-dog was equally unconcerned. Several birds chirping in early morning colloquy were the only sounds audible.

Holding up his arms to Juanita, he called softly, "You will have to jump into my arms!"

Juanita from her perch, hesitated; but already cognizant of his strength, and encouraged by his smiling, darkened face released herself and dropped into his arms.

Linell did not move from the impact as he broke the fall.

He marveled at the suppleness of her graceful, young body, and thrilled to the silken touch of her cheek as her head fell forward on his shoulder. He held her but an instant and then placed her on the ground. They stood not far from the low shed in front of the house and Juanita could just discern the trail over which she had traveled; a gray pencil line twisting into the forest.

"We must make for the automobile at the far end of the trail," said Linell, "and trust to good luck that there is gasoline to spare; enough to carry us to Marcoris."

"Let us trust more to God and your amazing fortitude," corrected Juanita seriously.

"Most certainly; good luck is God, and bad luck is the devil!" He pointed in the direction of the trail. "If we are discovered before we get into the forest, you must keep going while I cover your retreat. . . . If the delay is long, you must hide in the underbrush until I search you out."

Juanita acceded and they started across the clearing in the direction of the trail.

Perhaps a third of the distance had been covered, when Carlos the watch-dog poked his nose around the far corner of the rancho house. He sniffed the air suspiciously and bared his fangs. Then his yellow eyes espied the pair in the clearing. He leaped fully into view and came charging toward them, his barking loud and furious.

Linell whirled about and faced the onrushing dog, smothering an American invective.

"The brute got our scent—the breeze shifted! . . . Run quickly, Señorita! Get well into the forest—I'll find you!" He drew out his heavy automatic pistol from inside his camisa and held it ready.

With a startled cry Juanita obeyed him, running on toward the trail.

Another moment and Carlos, snarling, fangs bare leaped at

Linell's throat. The latter's pistol exploded in the dog's face and simultaneously he leaped aside. Carlos screamed in mid-air and fell in a loose heap at Linell's feet. Its body twitched and forepaws lashed out spasmodically in the last throes of death.

Lights appeared immediately in the windows of the house following the report of the pistol and excited voices were borne to Linell's ears as he ran after Juanita. She had already disappeared in the forest.

Glancing over his shoulder he saw the middle door of the house burst open and men leap out into the clearing, one or two carrying rifles.

Cadeus Belgarde was the foremost, and seeing the fleeing American, dropped down on one knee, and raising his rifle to his shoulder began firing. Linell was a plain but elusive target in the light of the sun just rising over the high hills.

He realized his danger as the first two bullets cracked in the air close to his head, and he began running zig-zag fashion the remainder of the distance to the forest.

The other men had lined up with Belgarde and they too began blazing away; and just as Linell reached the trail, he received a terrific blow on his left shoulder followed instantly by a searing hot pain.

It was not the force of the bullet that knocked him off balance, but his foot caught in a bush creeper and he tumbled headlong into the tall grass to the right of the trail. His tripping probably saved him further wounds, for several bullets cracked in the air a second or two later over the spot where he had tripped.

He recovered his sense of direction and crawled back to the edge of the clearing, thankful that a ceiba trunk screened him, and that it was his left shoulder that drooped limp and numb. He thrust his pistol out and to the right side of the tree, and "sighted in" at the leading man running toward him.

It was not Belgrade, but another, carrying a pistol.

Linell squeezed off his first shot, and the leading man, over a hundred yards away, tumbled violently to the ground, writhed there for a moment and then lay still.

Biting his lip, in an effort to forget the burning shoots of pain now traveling down his arm, he presented his pistol again as a few wild shots spattered against the trees behind him. He fired his second shot, and another man shrieking in pain, took a somersault in midair before he fell. What next transpired brought a pain-twitched smile to his grim face. The rest of the men had turned about and were running back toward the house in much greater haste than that with which they had issued.

The loud, nasal voice of Cadeus Belgrade called out to them somewhere in the region of the corral where he had long since taken refuge. They paid no heed but continued on until they reached the wide doorway of the house. So eager was each to enter first, that for a moment no one entered.

Linell took careful aim, for the distance was great, and fired twice into the massed figures. A yell of pain rent the air, and when at last they passed inside the house, the last man limped noticeably on one foot.

The door had scarcely slammed after them, when Belgarde, screened behind a corral post, and lying on his belly, began firing with his rifle in Linell's direction. But although the bullets cracked dangerously close, his elevation was too high to do any damage.

Linell answered the fire, his only visible target being the light vapor of smoke from the rifle muzzle of his enemy. The horses were milling and snorting with fear at the far end of the corral, and because they threatened to break through the fence, Belgarde ceased firing and waited.

Linell fired the last shot in the chamber of his pistol in the general direction of his enemy, and extracting the empty mag-

azine, replaced it with a full one, and then slid back away from the tree. He crawled backward until well into the forest, then struggling to his feet with great effort, stumbled down the trail. He felt the warm, sticky blood running down his left arm and chest, and dizziness assailed him.

Assured that he was far enough down the trail so that his voice would not carry back to the man at the corral, he called out loudly to Juanita. He waited for a response, and then called out again several times, directing his voice to either side of the trail, but he received no answer. He then decided that the girl had continued on to the waiting automobile at the end of the trail.

The morning sun had topped the forest in all its blazing splendor, but although the atmosphere was warm and pleasant, he shivered all through his body, which to him was a dangerous sign. He listened carefully for sounds of pursuit, but the great forest was still. Avoiding a large, black tarantula in his path, he continued onward, each step a herculean effort.

Reaching the log bridge over the little stream, he was forced to lie down on his back and rest. Remaining in this position, he tore strips of cloth from his camisa, and using two handkerchiefs, contrived a crude wad and pressed it against his wound. He also removed his belt and with painstaking effort managed to draw it tightly over his shoulder and buckle it securely over the wad of cloth. His entire left shoulder had become dead, and his arm dangled uselessly by his side. Despite the burning feeling through the rest of his body and equally hot face, he shivered more than ever. He realized that he had a rapidly rising fever, and fevers in Santo Domingo prove fatal without proper attention. His throat and tongue were like parchment; his head throbbed and his eyes were sore.

With much pain, he turned over on his knees and one good hand and crawled to the brink of the stream. He did not drink, knowing the water to be bad, but rinsed out his mouth,

bathed his face and head, and saturated the wad over his wound. But despite the cooling applications the fever continued with increased intensity.

Crawling back to the bridge, he crossed it and labored on. He cried out in hopeless abandon, for notwithstanding his great courage and perseverance his whole body throbbed and revolted against further progress. His head spinning, the shadows cast by trees appeared like gigantic serpents twisting about.

What answer had he to give to Philip Kent for using the Canelon girl in his plans; what answer for failing and bungling the job anyway? . . . Well, he preferred to die in his attempt to save the girl than be taken prisoner—at least, that much he could do! . . . He, Frank Linell who had helped to stem the German tide at Belleau Woods, and fought with Cukela in the Haitien campaign—was he licked? . . . Not yet!

A sob escaped him; then he heard a horse's neigh far off on the trail. Asserting his greatest efforts, he managed to crawl off the trail into the underbrush, where he propped himself against a cajuillas bush. A thick-sheaved Spanish bayonet screened him from the trail.

Again came the horse's neigh much nearer now, accompanied by the crackling sounds of hoofs upon palm sheaves strewn over the trail. His hand shook like a leaf as he presented his pistol to the trail through the sheaves of the bayonet, and his body swayed back and forth. His head felt as though sand were pouring through it and the trail began to rise and fall like the inundations of ocean billows.

Through half closed, fever reddened eyes he saw five or six horsemen coming down the trail in single file. Once they passed him, all chances of saving the Canelon girl were lost! . . . Well, if he did bungle the job, he could leave more evidence there in the trail, that at least he died bungling!

And as the horsemen drew nearer, he tried to steady his

pistol aimed at the leader who was just abreast of him. But with such a mirage now before his eyes, his target was elusive—dancing! His pistol shook more than ever, and because his target was moving past, he tried vainly to squeeze the trigger. Suddenly darkness descended over his eyes; came dancing red lights and he sank down and down, engulfed in a terrible black void. His pistol fell from his hand, caught on the tip of a prickly sheaf and hung there.

Cadeus Belgarde reined in his horse a few feet beyond the hidden American and waited until the other pursuers came abreast of him. Rosa Ascuncion was the first to reach his side.

"Well, Cadeus, it looks as if our worthy Americano has put considerable distance between us and the La Palma trail. . . . However, Tomás tells me that there is not enough gasoline left in our car to carry him and the girl to the Marcoris Highway. . . . We can overtake them easily."

"How well he handles a pistol, Señora!" commented Belgarde. "I have never seen his equal even among Krim's tribesmen in Morocco. . . . Sapristi! Both Antonio and Santiago dropped with bullets through their hearts, and Emilio is howling over a shattered leg."

"Both Americanos are devils with pistols, Cadeus! . . . that is the reason why they have enjoyed such good health and live to boast of it. . . . But now you had better gallop on ahead and try to reach the car before them."

Belgarde gathered in his reins, but an evident thought stayed him.

"When are we returning to La Capital, Señora?" he asked directly. "Ortega must be waiting for us."

"Immediately after we find the girl and the Americano," replied the woman, and then she smiled. "One prize we are sure of, but two more will not please El Jefe the less!"

Belgarde's white teeth showed in a broad grin of mutual understanding, and digging his heels into the sides of his horse, he galloped away.

CHAPTER XI

Four days a prisoner in a small, musty smelling room, trussed up neatly on a cold, cement floor, left Philip Kent thoroughly angry and disgusted with himself. Angry because he had underestimated the prowess of his enemies, and disgusted for permitting himself to step so easily into a school-boy trap. After four years running free in Santo Domingo, exposed to countless dangers it had come to this. But reflection had cooled his temper, forcing him to smile over the simplicity of it all.

On the second day of his captivity, his conjecture as to who had tied the military knots in the rope that bound him, was established by the appearance of Cadeus Belgarde, who interviewed him during one of his frugal meals. The Frenchman was frank in admitting his part in the capture, and in a gloating manner informed Kent that there was much in store for him.

Kent proved an adept in diplomacy by avoiding an increase of hatred, and his exchange of words was so charged with good humor that Belgarde left him with unfeigned respect. Perhaps his parting "sacre cochon" was genuine, but the light in his sharp, black eyes belied it.

Kent's next visitor was the beautiful Mercedes Baptista, but she troubled him more than the Frenchman. Her lone topic was Juanita Canelon, and she pained him with the story of her escapade in the role of Rosa Ascuncion. He listened to her lies regarding Juanita's attitude, and if he believed only part of them, he was most surely an outcast from Canelon friendship. But in common sense reasoning he smiled over

this until Mercedes openly confessed that her next visit to Boca Chica would result in the kidnapping of Juanita. There was fire in his eyes.

"Why must you and Natera take advantage of that innocent girl?" he had pleaded. "Surely, despite our little war you are not going to vent your hatred on someone who has done you no harm, you and yours? . . . Is it not sufficiently pleasing that you have rendered helpless the one who has been responsible for all your trouble?"

Mercedes had merely smiled.

"When a leader is caught, Capitán, there still remains his followers and sympathizers to get rid of—the old Spanish custom you know! . . . As for the Señorita Juanita, believe me—she is not so innocent. Perhaps it might interest you to know that the Señor De Gabriels is more in her favor since your reported disappearance. . . . Takes long, moonlight rides with him along the Marcoris Highway; that much I have seen myself. But that is always the way of a woman; her privilege you know . . . to swing immediately from one man to another. Of course, De Gabriels is indeed a handsome man and wealthy, but it is quite unfair to you Capitán, helpless as you are."

And when Mercedes left him, Kent became ilke a caged animal, anxious over Juanita. He took no stock in her attempt to make him jealous, for it was that and nothing more, but he felt sure that her threat to kidnap the girl bore truth. His desire to escape was greater now than ever, and only for the watchfulness of the two guards who fed him during his meals, he would have fought with his bare hands to freedom.

He had been fed regularly three times, a day, which was decided evidence that he was to be preserved. While one big, black fellow stood behind pressing a pistol into his back, another slipped his bonds which permitted him to eat. The food was meager and poor; half cooked rice and tough, veiny meat. He ate every morsel however in a sensible effort to

husband his strength, for optimism was predominant within him.

With the arrival of the third day the suspense was great.

What was Frank Linell doing? . . . Surely he would raid the house knowing that Mercedes Baptista lived there! . . . It was not like Frank to delay in running down possible clues, especially when he had disappeared!

He experienced some relief when his guards, visiting him in the afternoon, or shortly following his second meal, removed the rope from his feet. He was to be granted the free use of his legs unless he made unnecessary noise which would rob him of such a privilege. At first he exercised his legs, walking the four walls again and again; and then listening occasionally at the crack of his prison door, he had gleaned a little information from snatches of conversation heard on the other side. He recognized the voices of Cadeus Belgarde and the Baptista woman, and they said enough to assure him that they were not very sure of their course and were waiting for orders. Manuel Ortega's name was mentioned, and it appeared that he had gone to Seibo but was long over-due in his return. During the rest of the day all was silent in the other room, and because of this he paced the floor in distraction.

He had surveyed his prison countless times for the remotest possibility of escape. It was bare of furniture save for a broken-down chair near the door and a heavy, rough mahogany box, once serving as a large trunk or chest occupying one corner. Some rags and a dirty white pillow had been thrown into the chest, serving as a makeshift bed which he had used. But he had enjoyed little sleep; merely lying in such cramped quarters tied as he was, thinking, constantly planning, yet arriving at nothing. And because the one door and a small ventilator hatchway high on the back wall offered the only possibilities of egress, escape was entirely out of the question. The one was locked and guarded and the other

heavily barred and scarcely large enough for the passage of a body.

There was nothing left to do but think and hope and arrive at some conclusions. His life had been spared for important reasons and the Frenchman Belgarde had become the master mind of the Natera band. If there was a future for himself, the game now offered something better than idle hide and seek. It meant a battle of wits against a man equally as intelligent in the military as he and Frank Linell; a French ex-army officer of no mean ability.

Was Ramon Natera, growing fat in his mountain retreat, stepping aside and permitting Belgarde to take the helm? The Ramon Natera of a year ago seemed hardly the same man today; the dashing, fearless, will-o'-the-wisp of banditry! . . . Had he become lukewarm in his daring enterprises, or did his failure to show himself in the field mask some great coup?

The fourth day arrived, and Kent was in such a state of dejection, that his otherwise optimistic attitude threatened to break. The guards who served his breakfast and noon meal were intelligent enough to sense danger despite the Americano's helplessness. He received the prodding pistol deeper in his back as he ate and his arms were tied more securely than ever when he had finished.

The afternoon was unbearable, but there came a great reaction when Mercedes Baptista showed herself in the doorway while he was being served his evening meal. The flickering light from the candle placed on the floor by the guards cast great shadows on the walls, creating an eerie atmosphere. Quite mysteriously he felt freedom beyond the woman in the other room, as though his captivity had ended. It was palpable, real!

"Buenas noches, my brave Capitán!" she greeted, leaning against the framework of the doorway. "How is my pris-

oner getting along . . . was I not kind to grant you the use of your legs?"

Kent looked up in her face. The smile on her beautiful face was anything but genuine and it failed to hide strained lines there. He was at a loss to understand why such an obviously intelligent woman as she, was content with the lot into which she had cast herself. Undoubtedly, Ramon Natera held some sinister influence over her despite the known fact that she was his mistress.

He pushed his tin, dinner plate away from him in an indifferent manner.

"Oh, I am very well, Señora, considering the comforts with which you have provided me so generously. . . . What I should like to know is—what is holding up your plans? Why the delay . . . are you fattening me for the kill?"

Mercedes laughed good naturedly.

"You are just like the pig, Belgarde calls you, only you are more conscious of the cost of your board. In place of a contented grunt, you ask foolish questions. . . . Well, I'll be fair. . . . The delay is caused by the absence of one man, and my enthusiasm to bring two prisoners into the mountains."

A tremor passed over Kent.

"Then you did visit Boca Chica again!" he cried. "You have made the Canelon girl your other prisoner?"

Mercedes Baptista's face was a blank enigma.

"I shall leave that to your imagination, Capitán," she replied a little coldly. "Perhaps it is the girl, perhaps it is your worthy Sargento Linell! . . . However, within an hour you will receive a most unique surprise, and when mañana dawns on you in a more fitting lodging in Los Cordilleras, (a lodging you have long been searching for) you will have ample time to look at your companion!" And before Kent

had time to utter another word, she turned about quickly and disappeared into the other room.

The guards, tall sons of Ham, rebound their prisoner, picked up the empty plates and also disappeared.

With the closing of the door and slipping home of bolts, Kent discovered that the candle had been forgotten. It was his first pleasure of being left alone with light, and he fostered the hope that his guards would not remember to return for the candle. The flickering light offered much comfort in place of the dismal blackness of the room.

He arose with some effort from the floor, and sliding the candle and holder across the room with one foot, he took his customary seat on the edge of the old chest. The yellow light of the candle held him fascinated as he pondered Mercedes' disclosures.

Was there much truth in what she said; if so, who could it be—Juanita, or Linell? . . . It could be either, for he realized that his assistant would be taking extreme chances in search of him, and that Juanita would fall easy victim to kidnapping. The man who was absent of course, was Manuel Ortega; but what did she mean by a unique surprise? . . . Oh, if escape were only possible!

He kicked out savagely at a small mound of dirt directly in front of the chest, and because the dirt failed to separate, he kicked at it again and again. He saw the hard caking fall away at last, and then his toe struck metal.

Surprised, he began scraping around the spot with the sole edge of his shoe, and a thrill swept over him when a rusted ring-bolt exposed itself in the candle light. Sliding the candle nearer, he fell on his knees, almost losing his balance in excitement, and by repeated blowing away of dust on the cement floor, he traced the faint lines of a square which enclosed the ring-bolt.

Scrambling to his feet with a wild hope surging within,

his eyes fell on the rusted, half torn off hinges of the chest. He turned his back to one of them and felt of its edge. To his joy he found that it was sharp enough to serve his purpose, and pressing closely against it by squatting down, he began a repeated, laborious rubbing up and down on the ragged edge. It seemed hours of labor, and although beads of sweat showed on his forehead and particles of rust chafed his wrists, the hemp rope resisted his efforts.

He doubled his efforts in feverish haste, anticipating the return of the guards, and at last (ages it seemed) the hemp began tearing and then parted so suddenly that one wrist was cut. Ecstasy. . . . His hands were free! He licked the cut, covering it with saliva and then exercised his hands.

Exultant, he pushed the chest back against the wall, and tiptoeing over to the door, picked up the broken chair as a weapon and stood for a moment listening. There were no sounds forthcoming from the next room, but he was sure he detected voices elsewhere. If they would only grant him five minutes longer!

Taking his crude weapon with him he returned to the ring-bolt, and placed it by his side for emergency. He then placed a foot on either side of the ring-bolt, and engaging it pulled steadily. There was little resistance to his efforts and a rectangle of cement detached itself from the floor and turned back on hinges. He stifled a desire to shout defiance to his captors, for here at last was escape from a room that had completely baffled him four, long days. Perhaps this was the unique surprise Mercedes held in store for him—an existing avenue of escape that had been under his feet all the time!

He picked up the candle, and waving it over his shoulder peered down into the hole and saw another floor about six feet below, stretching away into darkness. Ever mindful of a sudden surprise by Mercedes, he held the candle aloft with one free hand and slid down the hole to land in a narrow

passageway. Placing the candle at his feet, he reached up on his toes and dropped the lid back into place. It was then that he chided himself aloud for failing to make a more thorough search of the room above.

"Phil, old boy—you're slowing up! You're getting seedy . . . and if you ever expect to make this little country safe for Juanita Canelon, you've got to snap out of it! . . . From now on, no more mistakes for you; no surprises! . . . Cadeus Belgarde is in this game, and he is as smart as you!"

Holding the candle high, he strode ahead along a straight, narrow, cement corridor, the walls of which were about three feet apart, wet with moisture and stained by age. Five minutes of walking, and then the passageway descended gradually, which was due, he thought, to the parallel descent of the Calle General Lupon; leading perhaps to the Ozama River.

At last he was walking on an even plane again and the roof became higher. But to his alarm came the discovery that the candle had burned to within a half inch of wax, and he fairly ran on through the passageway. At a sharp turn he sprawled upon a short flight of stone steps, and at a glance counted ten in all. The top step was but two feet away from the roof and beyond it nothing but bare wall; the passageway had ended.

He listened for possible pursuit out of the darkness behind him, but a death-like silence pervaded the passageway. It was uncanny and wholly in keeping with some crypt sheltering the dead.

The sudden outlook was perplexing, but he mounted the steps, bending lower at each step, and placing the candle on the top step reached up and felt of the roof. The reflected light showed him no marks upon the cold, damp cement, although a patch about two feet square looked darker than the rest of the roof. The very nearness of the top step to

this patch indicated but one thing. He raised himself until his shoulders fitted squarely against the patch just as the candle sputtered a warning.

"This must be the exit!" he muttered. But only unyielding cement answered in the negative to his pressing shoulders. He growled savagely as the candle sputtered and then went out. It could not be, that after discovering the means of escape, he was trapped; to await the arrival of his enemies?

Cold sweat dampened his forehead as he raised his shoulders again to their task. He braced his feet straddlewise against each wall and placed his elbows on his thighs for increased support. Then he strove as never before, the muscles of his limbs cracking with the terrific strain and his blood vessels nearly bursting. To his great joy and relief the patch gave up slowly and resistance became less. What proved to be a stone cover rose easily now as his torso followed with it. An inrush of cool air struck his face, bringing instant relief to the burning there. His head came out into the night as the cover fell over backward upon grass.

Looking up he saw myriads of twinkling, silver stars in the heavens and a half yellow moon. His surprise was great when he crawled out of the hole and found himself in the patio of the ancient Casa de Colon. There stood the old ruin that once housed the son of Christopher Columbus, a hundred feet from where he stood, not unlike a battered French chateau crumbled by the siege guns of the Germans. However, it was a welcome sight to the eyes of Philip Kent.

He had scarcely dropped the cover to the hole back in place when men's voices issued out of the old ruin. He leaped behind a great pile of debris to hide and listen.

Two men stepped out of the darkness of the ruin into the moonlight-flooded patio, their shadows thrown on the grass-rifted flagstones. They were conversing in low tones as they hurried along in his direction, and as they drew near he had

little difficulty in recognizing the bulging form of Manuel Ortega, and the lean frame and nasal tone of Cadeus Belgarde.

They stopped directly in front of the passageway exit, and Kent, pressing against the pile of stone to prevent the casting of his own shadow, listened intently.

"Carajo!" exclaimed Belgarde, angrily. "I should cut off your ears for keeping us waiting so long—you black pig! . . . Four full days going from La Capital to Seibo and back? Sacre! I can make it in fifteen hours! . . . What in the name of hell delayed you?"

"Ask that crazy one Calles, Cadeus amigo," replied Ortega readily. "No! . . . that is impossible, for he is already dead; blown to little pieces!"

"What are you talking about?" cried Belgarde, an impatient "diable" trailing his Spanish.

"Well, Cadeus; I delivered the Señora Baptista's message to El Jefe, and he was so mad with joy over the capture of Kent, that he passed out whiskey to all of us. . . . Then he gave me a return message, but just as I was about to ride away, a great explosion was heard up on the plateau near the tunnel. . . . We found that the crazy Calles had accidentally dropped some dynamite directly in front of the tunnel entrance; your last box of it in fact. . . . You may guess what happened? So after digging out what remained of Calles and clearing away the entrance, I was able to be on my way."

Belgarde's momentary silence indicated that he was impressed.

"Very well, but I could risk a peso that you spent a half day tanking up in Seibo. . . . But come—go down into the passageway and deliver your message to the Señora Baptista. . . . Tell her to hurry with the Americano; I shall wait here to watch."

Ortega with a grunt hastened to obey, but before he was able to lift the cover over the passageway, it was suddenly thrown back and a man's head appeared.

Belgarde leaped forward, and he and Ortega reached down and lifted the newcomer out of the hole. Two more men followed after the first, and then Mercedes Baptista was helped out with more care.

Kent was reminded of hide and seek as he watched the group.

"The Americano has escaped, Cadeus!" were the first words of Mercedes in excited tone. "He located the entrance to the passageway, and it will not be long before he will return with the policia!"

"Sapristi!" hissed Belgarde. "Well, we had better return to La Palma at once, for the policia will close the Ozama bridge once the alarm is given. . . . Let us hope that we do not find the girl has escaped from the rancho also! Remember; the Sargento Linell could not be found, and it is dangerous with him hanging around."

He turned to Manuel Ortega.

"You, Manuel, start out at once for Seibo and tell Natera the bad news. . . . Say that we have the Canelon girl at least for our efforts, and that we shall bring her up when the coast is clear . . . and remember, there is no dynamite holding you up this time!

"Come, Señora," he added to Mercedes, "Tomás is waiting around the corner in the automobile . . . we have no time, to waste!"

Without any further parley, the entire group moved across the patio and disappeared in the darkness of the old ruin.

Kent deliberated behind the pile of stone.

So they had Juanita after all, and Frank Linell, trusty old Frank, was on the job guarding her; that explained his failure to go looking for him! . . . Well, there were two choices

left open for him; to make a clean-up of the rancho in La Palma, (the existence of which proved news) or grasp the excellent opportunity of trailing Manuel Ortega into Los Cordilleras and find the tunnel he had mentioned, which he was sure would clear up the mystery of Ramon Natera's hiding place!

CHAPTER XII

The morning sun climbed the eastern heights of the Cordillera Range, its progress manifested by the pink and blue splendor of the dawn. And with this advance herald of beauty, came the great Cyclopean eye peeping over the gray ridges and sending its diamantine shafts across the expanse of forest in the foothills.

The sun had scarcely cleared the ridges, toiling upward in the azure sky, when life was faintly perceptible in the little town of Seibo, nestling in a shallow bowl amidst the foothills.

Seibo was entirely a place of woods; a large clearing with a great forest of mahogany surrounding it. The only justification to its claim of being a town was a wide, dirt road dividing its center, bordered on either side by small, square, adobe houses, and behind them sprawled about, regardless of set location, were many thatched huts. Perhaps it had seen better days, for at the northern end of the road stood a curious old ruin of a church. It still had the semblance of Spanish design, and although the greater part of it had been reduced to a heap of moss covered stone, its ancient portal darkened by age was quite intact, with a crude iron cross surmounting it and a short flight of stone steps unyielding to the passage of time.

At the extreme southern end of the town stood a long, low building of wood and adobe, with a slanting roof of tar paper and wide, open shuttered windows running from ground to roof, much like individual doorways. A great open door in front looked out on the road, and over it splashed in black

paint were the words, "Café del Toro." Wisely had its more modern builders chosen its site, for it commanded the entrance to Seibo from the bigger towns south, and was the last chance for the wayfarer to quench his thirst before going into the mountains.

Notwithstanding the whiteness of the adobe houses along the road, Seibo was nothing more than squalor, filth and primitive poverty. Guinea hens scampered in and out of the drab hovels back from the sides of the road, their creaking calls answered by crowing roosters as though in challenge, and goats and pigs rubbed shoulders in apparently friendly relationship. Near a great pile of mahogany logs, a somnolent, scraggy coated burro lashed out its tail at a swarm of flies.

Many of the natives had already bestirred themselves and were moving about the town. A few went trudging down the road with heavy machetes swinging in their hands, evidently on the way to the cane fields of Santa Lucia, three kilometers to the southeast. Several, possibly loafers, judging from the absence of implements of labor, had congregated outside the Café del Toro, squatting on the ground near the doorway and conversing in low, sleepy tones.

The morning was well advanced, when a horseman cantered into town from the south and drew up in a cloud of white dust at the door of the café. He dismounted quickly, tossed his reins to one of the loafers and strode into the building. A few minutes later he reappeared and stood in the doorway wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. The bright sunlight fell fully upon him, illuminating the ugly features of Manuel Ortega.

He entirely ignored the greetings of the men assembled near the door, but relieving the accommodating one of his reins, he mounted up and cantered on through the town.

Reaching the church ruins, he followed the road to the right and soon left Seibo far behind him. The road at this point

became slightly narrower and assumed a gradual ascent with the dense forest on either side. He reduced the gait of his horse to a trot.

At a spot where the road twisted to the left, going due north in the direction of the mountain range, a tall man emerged from the bushes on the right side, and leading a tawny horse stepped into the road.

Ortega and his horse had become two bobbing dots in the distance.

The tall man stood for a moment close to the bushes, holding his reins with one hand and shading his eyes with the other as he watched the dots. A smile of pleasure brightened his mulatto face beneath a straw sombrero, and dressed as he was, Philip Kent looked much the same as he did the night previous, escaping from the Calle General Lupon.

"Well, Mister Ortega," he said aloud, dropping his hand to his side, "somewhere in those mountains lies the mystery of Ramon Natera's many escapes, and this time you are going to solve it!"

He dropped the reins over his horse's neck and climbed into the saddle. The animal leaped forward, but pressure on its mouth held it down to a trot. Maintaining this gait, and keeping well in on the side of the road, Kent thoughtfully reviewed the happenings of last night. The dots, however, constantly remained in his line of vision. . . .

After quitting the Casa Colon he had gone immediately to Headquarters and there found Señor De Gabriels closeted with Secretary Morales. The latter was overjoyed on seeing him, and De Gabriels, equally enthusiastic, lost no time in telling of the kidnapping of Juanita. He then offered his services and the use of his high-powered car outside.

Precious minutes passed while Kent deliberated. It was quite obvious that Frank Linell was watching the rancho in La Palma for developments, and ready to prevent Juanita

being carried into the mountains, but it was more certain that trailing Manuel Ortega and finding the hideout of Natera, would bring about a decisive end to all banditry. Although trusting in Linell's ability to watch over Juanita, it was with reluctance that he decided to trail Ortega into the mountains. With the use of De Gabriel's car he could reach the outskirts of Seibo far ahead of Ortega. However, before he left Headquarters in company with the eager consul, he prevailed upon Morales to send a raiding party immediately over to La Palma to aid Linell.

He realized that Ortega would use all cross trails in reducing his journey to a minimum, but the greatly superior speed of the consul's car, though forced to follow only negotiable roads, would outdistance his man.

Speeding along the Marcoris Highway at death flirting speed, it was not long after midnight when the big car reached a point on the last good road between Higuey and Seibo, where progress was no longer possible. Fortunately a native mounted on a horse was encountered, looking not unlike a bandit. Kent asked no questions, but at pistol point commandeered the horse, tied the man hand and foot, and placing him in back of the car, sent the consul back to La Capital.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when Kent reached Seibo, and passing through the town without challenge, chose a hiding place at the northern end of the road and awaited the appearance of Ortega. . . .

And now that Ortega was leading him at safe distance, headed in the direction of Los Cordilleras, there would be no recurrence of the episode in the Calle General Lupon. Whatever was to be done, would be done in the open and this time he would not be caught sleeping.

He did not change the gait of his horse unless the two dots ahead became hard to distinguish. The ascent of the road continued and the air became comfortably cool despite the

heat of the sun. On either side of the road the forest began to slope upward, higher and in greater density. And now as the road curved sharply to the right, he drew his horse down to a walk, for Ortega had decreased the distance between them, walking his horse also.

Soon the road ceased to ascend and went on through a cut in a great hill. At a spot where a giant mangrove felled by lightning lay fully across the road and leaving barely room for the passage of a horse, he stopped, dismounted and drew his horse into the screening of the tree's foliage. Such a move was prompted by the stopping of Ortega a thousand meters farther on.

Peering through the foliage he saw the bandit turn his horse about, remaining immovable a few minutes in evident search for followers. At length Ortega swung his horse to the left, climbed the high embankment and disappeared into a dense forest of mahogany.

From beneath his rags, Kent drew out a small, blue-printed map, and spreading it on his knees, orientated it before him, the mahogany forest proving due north. Then following the road outlined on the map, he discovered that at the point where Ortega disappeared, a small, rough trail was indicated by a faint, jagged, hyphen-marked line and that it petered out in the mountains. This was hardly the first time he had chased Ramon Natera and his men into the mountains, nor was the surrounding country strange to him, but this was the first time that the pursued had used this trail.

Scenting something unusual, he returned the map to his pocket and remounted. Following the road for a distance of five hundred meters, he dismounted again and concealed his horse in the forest on the opposite side diagonally to the entrance of the trail.

From where he tied his horse, he walked on through the

forest, skirting the road until he arrived in close proximity to the small trail. Mindful of possible ambush, he drew his pistol and approaching the edge of the road, peered out from behind a cajuillas bush. He saw the trail directly opposite, a streak of gray through the trees, twisting its way upward toward the lofty Cordilleras. He listened intently, and faintly there was borne to his ears the sound of breaking twigs, telling him that Ortega and his horse were making slow progress up the steep mountain slope.

Assured that an ambush was improbable for the present, he stepped briskly out into the road and running across it, climbed the embankment and entered the trail. A dislodged stone came tumbling down as he began the ascent through a jungle of cacti, cajuillas bush and Spanish bayonet. High above, the tallest peak of the Cordilleras kissed the clouds.

Alert, and keeping his pistol ready, he labored upward using all screening before him. He reached a line of sturdy mahoganies and pausing a moment, delved again into his ragged clothing. He brought to light a small, telescopic spy-glass. To his relief as he raised it to his eye, Ortega leading his horse, loomed up in the lens five hundred meters above, bobbing up and down through the trees. But as the timber line grew deeper they disappeared.

He put away the glass and surged forward, but the ascent became arduous. He bent to his task, however, wishing to diminish the distance to the bandit. The trail, though wide for a distance of half a mile soon narrowed and more than once he felt the spikes and needles of plant life.

Kent's map told him that Ortega's journey would end just where the trail ended, against a steep and impassible mountain side. For according to the last topographical survey, there was no pass over this particular peak of Los Cordilleras. A sheer wall of rock and coral was the only encouragement to the wayfarer at the end of the trail five or six

hundred yards further. Therefore he knew a great discovery lay in store for him.

He sensed a great relief, when after a quarter hour's more toiling, he came upon a level tract of open country, that is, a wooded plateau looking not unlike the upper landing of a gigantic stairway.

He rested beneath the shade of a lone mangrove, a foreigner amidst the more rugged mahogany trees, and removed his tattered sombrero. His ragged, cotton clothing stuck to his body from excessive sweat and the muscles of his legs and thighs were painfully tight. He wiped away the sweat from his forehead and was glad that he had left his false beard and moustache behind with his horse.

Resorting again to the spy-glass, he failed to observe Ortega or his horse, but could see quite plainly the white coral side of the mountain cliff; an inaccessible freak of Mother Nature. Further progress should necessitate extreme caution, for he was near enough to expect an ambush. The sun was an innocent enemy, beating down on his wet back mercilessly, and he vowed never again to wear such thin soled sandals.

With his automatic at "ready," he was about to move forward, when a dull, spattering thud in a tree trunk close to his ear, caused him to sprawl down upon his face. A faint whir of air, and the simultaneous "crack-bang!" of a rifle was a grim reminder that he was spotted.

Where he had fallen, brought him in dangerous proximity to the needle tipped pads of a big cactus. He smiled grimly and lay there thinking. He quickly realized that a too close contact with the enemy was not to be tolerated; in fact, the open greeting of gun-fire proved that their backs were to the wall.

Through his military training he deciphered that with the thud of the bullet and the following report of the rifle, its

owner was exactly five hundred yards away. Too often had he accurately confirmed such distances on rifle ranges. But was it Ortega who fired the shot? He had seen nothing in the bandit's equipment that resembled a rifle, or even part of one! Therefore it was plain some coup-de-guerre was being planned.

Remaining on the ground, and with some difficulty he removed his jacket. Then gathering together at arms' reach a few sticks of underbrush, he constructed a crude scarecrow by draping the jacket over the sticks and placing his sombrero on top. Very slowly he raised the scarecrow until it showed well above the cactus and secured it there with other sticks.

Chuckling over the old Indian trick, he fired his pistol once in the general direction of the enemy and then crawled on his belly away from the spot. He detoured about a hundred yards off and around the trail and found his feet. Keeping his back bent to the ground, he started up the mountain side again in a zig-zag, parallel course with the trail, using every bit of cover and eyes keenly alert.

He was well headed in the enemy's direction, when another leaden missile clipped a bayonet sheaf on his right, although the lapse of seconds between the crack of the bullet and the rifle's explosion was much shorter. Kent's calculations told him that he was two hundred yards nearer.

"The old game worked!" he muttered with a smile, detouring a little more, yet moving steadily forward. It was arduous and painful work breaking through the tangled underbrush, but he was glad he was clear of the wooded landing. Blood spots showed on his bare arms and legs from contact with barbed plants, and much of the substance he had used to darken his skin had rubbed off. He was determined to close with his enemy regardless of the odds, for perhaps after all, the firing was as good a ruse as his; to cover the escape of Ortega.

The trail on his right was lost to sight more often than once as he scrambled onward, avoiding the least sound as best he could. Midday had passed and the sun was long in descendency, but the thick trees and higher plants alleviated somewhat its relentless fire. His shirt, ragged otherwise, was now rent to ribbons and his bare back and shoulders exposed his undarkened skin sparkling with sweat.

Again his enemy's rifle sounded. It was a roar, and this time there came no crack of the bullet. He knew he was dangerously close now, and when a sunlit clearing showed through the trees a few feet ahead, he eased his progress to a crawl, holding his pistol up ahead of him.

He reached the edge of the clearing and lay down on his belly. The blistering sun shed its glaring rays upon a gigantic boulder almost directly in the center of the clearing.

Hearing a metallic "click," like the bolt of a rifle drawn back to eject a cartridge shell, he moved nearer the trail parallel with the clearing on elbows and knees a foot a minute. He discovered that the trail no longer existed, but had lost itself in the jungle far below, wherefore he took up his position to the right of the boulder behind an accommodating Spanish bayonet.

To his utter disappointment, no sign of life existed. It was just a half square of green and yellow field, clear of underbrush and trees and bordered on the sides and front by the forest, with a sheer wall of rock and white coral presenting its back like that of a family rocker. It was more than a likeable chair; a sort of harbor to the forest fastness, the boulder providing a substantial lighthouse. The highest peak of Los Cordilleras towered over all; a red and purple mitre with splotches of white coral sloping upward above the wall like great clusters of pearls.

Kent was completely confused by the outlook. Was the shooting more than a ruse—a decoy? He glanced furtively

to his rear, suspecting an attack from that quarter. Silence reigned, until again came the metallic "click." It came from behind the boulder, and peering out through the saber-like sheaves of the bayonet, he measured a hundred and fifty yards mentally from his position to the rugged face of the boulder. And because he had reached his last point of concealment, he waited, grimly patient, his automatic covering the boulder.

CHAPTER XIII

Sweat in tiny rivulets trickled down Kent's back as he gripped the heavy stock of his pistol. What was left of his shirt was a soaken, shredded rag, havoc of the cruel plant life and a relentless sun.

His eyes glued in fascination to the boulder, he saw the rim of a sombrero appear about two inches out from one side of it. His body grew tense and then relaxed as he swung his pistol to the left, centering its front sight just below the two inch rim of straw. No sounds broke the stillness of the forest haven, above the chattering of a green parrakeet high in the boughs of an ancient mahogany at the edge of the clearing.

The sombrero quivered slightly, showed another inch and then the muzzle of a rifle with elongated two feet of glistening steel, was thrust out beyond the sombrero, pointing in the general direction of the trail. Wavering a moment, its owner's shoulder appeared in the line of sights of Kent's pistol. The rifle was steady now, silent evidence that the one behind it was aiming at some object down the trail, presumably the scarecrow.

Kent settled himself comfortably in his prone position and with legs sprawled out loosely behind him, began breathing evenly as he took aim along the short barrel of his own weapon.

A dark spot now showed between the lower edge of the sombrero and the side of the boulder; a bewiskered face pressed against the stock of the menacing rifle.

The front sight of his pistol centered on the dark face,

and just as he began a slow, gradual squeeze on the trigger, the loud report of his enemy's rifle reverberated through the forest, startling the parrakeet from its perch and sending it fluttering away in the blue sky.

So near and sudden was the explosion that a recruit or novice in Kent's position would easily have lost his aim, but Kent's pistol was immovable as in a vise while the tightening of his wrist had not diminished. Subsequently came the explosion of his own weapon, and because the sombrero behind the boulder sank down, and an exposed shoulder presented a larger target, he fired again and then slid away from the bayonet and hugged the earth. He knew from great ability just where his steel jacketed bullets found lodgement, but experience also taught him to minimize his own exposure.

To his surprise no fusillade of shots followed from other concealed riflemen. A deathlike silence prevailed in the clearing. Lying on his belly a few minutes, he at length raised himself slightly on his elbows and risked a peeping glance through the sheaves of the bayonet. He saw the exposed torso of a hillman lying lifeless in the grass to the right of the boulder. The man's rifle had fallen in front of him and his sombrero had followed it, rolling a foot or two beyond. His kinky black head was twisted in distortion toward Kent; convincing proof that the pistol bullets had found their mark.

The fact that the man was not Manuel Ortega caused Kent some mental comment. Unquestionably the dead man was a member of the Natera band, but where was Ortega, or his horse? True, the boulder hid one man, but it was scarcely large enough to conceal two men and a horse! It was quite plain now that the dead man had covered the trail while Ortega with his horse mysteriously disappeared!

Disappointment overcame him, an angry expletive found

voice and he decided to take a chance. Standing up and crouching low, he ran as fast as he could out into the clearing. Half way between his place of concealment and the boulder, he purposely fell flat on his belly and raised his pistol. And because again there was no greeting of rifle fire, he concluded that the enemy comprised but one dead man.

Getting to his feet, he approached the boulder and rounding it quickly, came upon the inert body of the hillman. In a moment he had turned the body over on its back. His first bullet had brought instant death a half inch over the man's right eye, and the second had lodged in his shoulder. The face was horrible in its last expression, but after careful study he was able to recognize in the bearded face, one Julio Bannetta, wanted by the policia for murdering an entire native family. Therefore he suffered no qualms that his bullets had evened the score and taken away from Ramon Natera a most valued henchman.

The sun was now low in the west and its saffron shafts bathed the clearing in a sea of gold, filtering through the trees. The mountain peak high above was a canvas of purple, green and burnished gold. The forest now seemed to take life. Great lizards hissed, plant life rasped in the slight breeze springing up, and the green parrakeet joined by its mate, chattered like two old women from another perch far down the trail.

Deeply chagrined by Ortega's mysterious disappearance and realizing that twilight was but two hours away, Kent began a systematic search around the boulder. He easily discovered the hoofprints of Ortega's horse leading into the clearing, but they ended in trampling evidence a few feet in front of the boulder. This caused him deep thought, but just as he was in the act of stooping down behind the boulder to examine the ground, he was amazed on beholding it tilting back toward him.

Seeking safety from the slowly falling giant of stone, he fell back and rolled away from it. To his greater amazement he beheld a square of earth and grass over five yards square rise as slowly as the falling of the boulder. His intelligence overcame stupefaction when he realized instantly that here was the solution to Ortega's disappearance, and he crawled quickly to a hiding place behind the boulder and waited, pistol raised.

Minutes elapsed, minutes of silence and suspense, and then out of the great hole yawning beneath the raised lid of earth, crawled the pitiful little figure of a man, his clothing all but torn from his body and his bared skin raised by large, red welts. With an evident, last supreme effort he negotiated the edge of the hole and then tumbled over in the grass a few feet away from the dead Bannetta. From where he lay he called out weakly in a dry, choked voice:

"Julio! . . . Julio Bannetta; for love of the Santa Maria . . . give me water!"

Kent had not stirred, waiting until he was sure of the situation.

Outstretched hands, empty, thin and bony, were thrust out to him in a gesture of appeal, although he knew he was unobserved. Again the apparently helpless man cried out for water, weaker still; telling of a parched throat and swollen tongue surrendering to that cruel enemy—thirst.

Kent looked about him and saw lying under the shade of the boulder a straw covered water gourd. He was undecided whether he should bring aid to the huddled man in the grass, for he strongly suspected a ruse. But picking up the gourd by its long rope in his left hand and holding his pistol ready, he crawled slowly around the boulder and risked a glance into the great hole. Stygian blackness was all he saw and the cold air from a great depth rushed up to his face.

"Julio—Julio! . . . Water—water!" mumbled the helpless one, rolling his head from side to side.

Without more ado, he went to the man's side, taking note of the absence of weapons on his person. He faced the great hole as he bent down holding the gourd low but keeping his pistol presented.

The man stirred, raised his head and held up his hands beseechingly.

"Ah, hombre!" he murmured pitiously. "I am too weak to defend myself. . . . Caramba! Shoot me, or give me water!"

In the golden light of the sinking sun, Kent saw the look of utter subjection and abandonment in a young face despite a growth of beard and many cuts and bruises marking it. The cuts had swelled and he knew that it was not caused by the sun, or the ravages of thirst and hunger. The bare flesh of arms, chest and shoulders was also covered with ugly welts, and over all was dust and dirt and clinging cactus needles. Here was a most pitiful object of cruelty, and succor was the only word framed in his mind.

He passed the gourd to the man, who grasped it greedily. Such murmurings of joy between gurgling draughts of the water as it assuaged the parched throat, brought a grim smile to Kent's face. He waited until he knew relief had been given and then took the gourd away, having to resort to force.

A deep sigh of relief escaped the man.

"Dios bless you, amigo fino! . . . You are a friend to the miserable! . . . But tell me; you are a stranger to Los Cordilleras, and yet you are not an enemy?"

Kent weighed the question, evading it.

"Tell me, hombre. . . . If you come from Ramon Natera, are you followed by others?"

The other shook his head, licking his lips.

"No, amigo, but Julio's relief is due here by nightfall. . . .

I passed that snake Ortega coming through the tunnel, but he did not see me; I hid in a lime hole. . . . Yes, I come from Ramon Natera, but as his enemy, and I owe him revenge for what he has done to me!"

Kent arched his forehead.

"It is getting late; but tell me, who are you and how did you get into such trouble?"

Peering curiously into Kent's face, the little fellow sat up.

"My name is Miguel Herrera, but it really does not matter now, whoever you are. . . . Your face is a kind face and unlike any I have seen in Dominicana." He paused, swallowed hard several times and his wounded face twitched in pain. "Tell me; do you owe allegiance to Ramon Natera, El Jefe?"

Kent smiled inwardly.

"No, little man—I, too, am his enemy."

Miguel Herrera breathed sibilantly through puffed lips and raised his hands to the twilight sky.

"Buenos! . . . Oh, Madre de Dios . . . would that I were able to tear out the heart of him—the devil! . . . Vengeance I ask great Mother; vengeance for my wrongs!"

His body shook with sobs but not because of physical pain. They were tears of a wounded soul; a soul that had been trampled upon by the heel of a cruel oppressor. He wiped his eyes and looked again into Kent's face.

"You are different than a Dominicano, amigo," he said in softer tones. "Your eyes are different; they are not cruel—si, they are not the eyes of a bandolero! . . . Perhaps too, you owe Natera a score?"

The sun had dropped behind the Cordillera range and twilight shadows claimed the clearing.

"Come, Herrera," Kent said kindly. "If as you say, a

relief guard is expected at sun-down, we must hurry pronto out of here."

"But where is Julio, Julio Bannetta, Señor?"

"He is dead Herrera; I was forced to shoot him."

Kent pointed to the still body behind him.

"That is good! He was a friend of Ortega's and I loved him not. . . . But go and close the tunnel entrance, Señor, although it will be two hours before another guard gets here, leaving Natera's camp at sun-down."

"How is it closed?" asked Kent.

Herrera tried to rise, but failing with a cry of pain, pointed to the boulder.

"Find the steel rod under the rock on the other side, and pull on it."

Already elated over the results of his trip into the hills, Kent went to the boulder and searched the base of it. In a moment he found the rod hidden in the same place where he had found the water gourd. Drawing out the rod, looking very much like the handle end of a surveyor's chain, he pulled steadily on it and slowly the great lid and boulder dropped back into place. What amazed him, was the engineering of the whole scheme, so silently intricate was its mechanical function. The mystery of Los Cordilleras was solved!

He returned to the side of Herrera and was greeted by the request for more water. He turned over the gourd to him and then picking up the body of Julio Bannetta and his rifle, strode across the clearing to the edge of the forest and deposited his gruesome burden in the spiny undergrowth, hiding it completely from sight. He then removed the bolt from the rifle and tossing the one and then the other into different hiding places, returned to Herrera and squatted down by his side.

"Listen, Herrera, and listen carefully," he said, deliber-

ately. "There is no question but that you suffered terribly by the hands of Natera, and because I sympathize with you, I am going to help you. . . . All I ask is your trust—your friendship. . . . You are right—I am not a Dominicano, but the Capitán Kent of the policia! . . . You desire revenge for your wrongs—perfectamente! . . . You have now the opportunity not only for revenge, but the chance to win your freedom and escape punishment by the authorities."

Over these disclosures Herrera's eyes went wide in astonishment.

"Not the Capitán Kent—the great Americano? . . . Carajo! Your dress and color deceived me Captain, yet I knew you were not of the hills. . . . Yes, I seek vengeance and freedom from a devil! Besides, you saved my life for I was all but finished. . . . Ask of me anything that I am quite able to do—I am yours to command!"

Kent was sure of his man.

"First, I want you to tell me about this passageway under Los Cordilleras and who was responsible for the clever workmanship on the mechanism of that door leading into it. . . . Why, it's a complete engineering feat!"

Herrera laughed; a mirthless endeavor.

"The passageway is natural Capitán, and it leads right under the mountain, not unlike the Crystal Caves of San Isidro. It comes out at the other end on a high plateau overlooking the Pedro Sanchez valley, and from there is but a short ride down the mountain side to the camp of Natera. . . . As for the great door, 'tis but the work of the Frenchman, Cadeus Belgarde, who changed a simple entrance, formerly hidden by bushes, into the cunningly devised doorway as it is now. . . . He is another devil, especially when he is lacking his morphine, but a great engineer.

"One day when I was guarding the old entrance, Belgarde stood by in company with Natera and studied the big boulder

and hole beneath it. . . . It was during that time when you and the policia made it so hot for us.

"Well, Belgarde suddenly thought of a plan and outlined it to El Jefe. He was told that he was crazy, but the Frenchman overruled (he established that power over Natera on the very day he joined the band) and in the course of weeks he made that big boulder balance a door over the entrance, so that it opened and closed by pulling a wire from both sides. . . . Such work on it, Capitán; the labor, hot sun, and painstaking work of making the earth and grass cling to the door, but it was accomplished. . . . And so overjoyed was Natera in its success, and sure that the policia would never find him, that he sent for the Señora Mercedes, his woman in Port-au-Prince."

Smiling, Kent placed his hand on the little fellow's shoulder.

"What you have told me Herrera, is sufficient to insure your freedom and perhaps reward. . . . I could ask you much more, but come; it is already night and that relief guard will discover us. I will help you down to the Seibo road and take you away on my horse."

Herrera tried to rise but fell back crying out in pain.

"It is my legs, Capitán! . . . Caramba—they burn like fire!"

Without a word Kent bent down, and picking up the frail body, he swung it across his shoulders, service fashion.

Herrera was but a child's weight, and it was with gladdened heart that Philip Kent descended the trail.

A new yellow moon, fully rounded glowed in the heavens through the trees and myriad stars blinked over the crest of Los Cordilleras.

It was then that he thought of Juanita Canelon and Frank Linell as he trudged downward, but there was eagerness to his step; like one homeward bound after the labors of the day.

CHAPTER XIV

Ramon Natera smashed his big fist down on the desk in front of him and bellowed in anger.

"You will bring the Americano almost to my very door—huh? . . . Why, you crazy head I should have knocked out what little brains you have!"

Manuel Ortega, completely cowed, slunk to one corner of the room upon his knees whimpering in pain, following a severe beating administered him by the bandit leader.

"Of course, it is understood you wish to live," Natera added in less noisy tone, his piggish little eyes glinting like topazes. "I have much use for you yet. . . . Time enough to feed you to the vultures like we found poor Juilo; or better still, to die slowly like little Herrera without water! . . . What do you say—fool?"

And because Ortega answered not and groveled closer in the corner in fear, Natera struck the desk again several times.

"Sangre de Cristo! Answer me . . . why you beg for your life?"

Ortega turned away from the corner still on his knees and exhibited a beseeching, pitiful face, bruised and blood streaked.

"Si, great man; I want to do something to please you! . . . Give me this last chance to serve you better . . . command me—command me!"

Natera's eyelids narrowed to mere slits and a sardonic grin spread his yellowish brown face.

"Words, Manuel—just words! . . . But remember; one more slip like you made and Julio Bannetta shall have com-

pany in hell! . . . Now get up and take your chicken skin out of here, but report back at two of the hour with my horse. And keep your wagging tongue quiet down below with the other men. I do not want them to know of my trip to La Capital . . . now vamos!"

Ortega arose as quickly as sore limbs would permit, backed away to the door, and muttering a thoughtless "adios," passed outside.

As he wearily descended the hill he saw a party of horsemen pass the sleeping quarters of the men near the corral at the foot of the hill. As the party came on up the hill, he recognized Mercedes Baptista on the leading horse and deduced that the other woman riding just behind her was the Canelon girl. Both the women and men accompanying them slumped wearily in their saddles and were covered with white dust.

With a pleased expression on his blood caked face, he turned about quickly and forgetting his soreness, ran back to the hut. He did not enter but pulled aside the curtain of dirty white canvas hanging over the window near the door and thrust his head inside.

He was greeted by the muzzle of Ramon Natera's pistol, as the latter turned suddenly in his chair at the rustling of the curtain. It was a swift, cautionary move, proving that the bandit leader was ever on the alert.

"*Excusemé, Jefe!*" Ortega called to him. "The Señora Mercedes has arrived with the Canelon girl!"

Natera leaped to his feet, eyes sparkling with joy, and thrusting his pistol into the folds of the broad, red sash girdling his waist, he left the room and joined Ortega outside. The riders had already reached the top of the hill and drew rein near the door.

Natera reached up to Mercedes Baptista on her horse.

"Ah, Mercedes sweet girl," he greeted, assisting her to the

ground. "What a surprise to see you again. . . . Got the Canelon girl—hub; well, that is some capture!"

Mercedes nodded tiredly and then spoke over her shoulder to one of the men.

"Leave the girl here Tomás, then you and the others turn in for some sleep after rubbing the horses."

Ortega, attempting to remove the discolorations from his face by recourse to sputum and a startling red handkerchief, observed Natera standing silently to one side, offering no comment, which was his usual custom when the Baptista woman was giving orders. But as he proceeded to follow the other men down the hill, the voice of Mercedes deterred him.

"Stay, Manuel; you will be needed!"

He obeyed her.

After Juanita Canelon had been assisted to the ground by Tomás, she remained close by the side of Mercedes, gazing through heavy, sleepy eyes at Ramon Natera. Never in all her young life had she beheld such a wicked looking brute of a man. His enormous physique amazed her, and coupled with the stories she had heard concerning his cruel and terrifying escapades now challenged her courage.

After she had been recaptured during her flight through the forest near La Palma, she became reconciled to the fact that the brave Sargento Linell was no more. Even the Baptista woman had confided to her that he had been shot, causing her a great feeling of depression and sadness.

The long trip from La Palma had been torture for her, and so weirdly strange was the passage through the tunnel under the mountain that she conjured up pages of Dantes' Inferno. And like the cryptic sign at the brink of the river Styx—"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," came the realization of the hopelessness of her rescue, when the party emerged at last in the sunlight at the other end of the tunnel.

She had discovered that Mercedes Baptista, though of evi-

dent, immoral character and extremely severe with the men, was really a kindly person, treating her now with seeming good nature. So despite the discouraging outlook, and the fact that she was in the very lair of the bandoleros, she had not completely resigned herself to a critical position. Indeed, a word had been dropped here and there to indicate that Philip Kent was very much alive. If this were true, (and her heart beat with joyful hope) she could suffer most anything!

Mercedes Baptista drew her attention.

"Come, Señorita; if you are as tired and sleepy as I, a bed should be your first thought."

Such an invitation was a panacea to Juanita's tired mind and body, and gladly did she follow the woman inside the hut.

Entering the bandit leader's bedroom, Mercedes told her to make herself comfortable on the bed, assuring her that she would be entirely safe. Then she closed the door and rejoined Natera and Ortega, who were waiting in the little hallway.

"You have done well, Mercedes niña," grinned Natera, patting her lightly on the shoulder. "But tell me how you accomplished it so quickly after the Capitán Kent escaped?"

Mercedes smiled, a worn smile.

"Well, Ramon, I did not enjoy having to face you after bungling the capture of Kent, so Belgarde and I worked fast, knowing he would be after us. . . . To lose one of our prisoners was bad enough, but the two of them . . . carajo! . . . But let us go into the other room; a great deal has yet to be told and more to be done."

Manuel Ortega hesitated in joining the two in the dining room, but at a word from Mercedes, followed them inside. They took seats around the heavy, oak table.

Mercedes leaned wearily on elbows before her and engaged Natera's eyes.

"Now Ramon, it is negligible to go into detail how we got

safely away from Belgarde's rancho. . . . Suffice be it, that we must abandon all further use of the rancho."

Natera straightened up sharply in his chair and exhibited great concern.

"Give up the rancho? Why, you must be loco, dear one!"

"I shall become loco all right, Ramon," she replied quickly, "if I do not get rest and sleep after dodging bullets from those dangerous Americanos!"

"Caramba! The other Americano, huh? . . . Where will either of them turn up next! . . . Manuel here, left one of them on the north trail only yesterday, and another chases you away from La Palma! . . . Kill them I must, regardless of all risk; they know too much now!"

"Yes, kill them you must!" mocked Mercedes scornfully. . . . You the big jefe of all bandoleros . . . sitting up here out of harm's way, while your tools risk their lives for you daily!

"Already, Raphael Nunez is serving a long sentence in Fort Ozama; Antonio and Santiago have died from Americano bullets, and Garcia, on guard at the tunnel told me how Julio Bannetta was shot yesterday . . . four of your best men! . . . Who will be next? Ah, I am afraid our Jefe has become an old man!"

Natera screwed his face into an ugly grimace, stuck his tongue into his cheek; then smiling grimly, reached across the table and patted her hand.

"Now, Mercedes, breath of my life, you are tired and irritable. . . . Is it not enough, that I go to Boca Chica this very noon to claim my first enemy—the Señor Canelon?"

Mercedes' scornful mien changed with such an announcement and a serious expression dimmed her beautiful face. And whereas she had withdrawn her hand from contact with his, she now leaned over the table and reclasped it.

"Listen Ramon, before you decide your next move! . . .

La Palma has been spotted by the policia; that means another heavy patrol along the Marcoris Highway. . . . You know better than to think those Americanos are fools; they are on the move all the time! . . . Besides, that patrol in Boca Chica is smart; gave me all kinds of trouble."

Natera's face held a certain air of skepticism, until Mercedes finished telling of the attempted rescue of Juanita Canelon; then it became serious.

"Well, I grant you that the rancho must be abandoned, but what about Belgarde and his horses?"

Mercedes shrugged her shoulders.

"You know Belgarde; he'll do what he thinks best, unless he runs out of morphine. . . . He is taking the horses over to Los Chicharrones, but will hang around La Palma until the policia make it too hot for him. . . . There is one satisfaction; the Frenchman wounded that Americano when he tried to escape with the girl."

"I should like to know which Americano it was, querida," said Natera. "Either one trailed Manuel here, all the way up from Seibo."

"It was impossible to tell. . . . Perhaps we were trailed on the way up from La Palma also. Nothing would surprise me now!"

Natera shook his head vigorously.

"No; one lesson is enough. . . . Three men guard the tunnel entrance now, and I have placed three men along the southwest trail and three in the Seibo road. . . . Were you not challenged at all three places?"

Mercedes nodded with no great show of enthusiasm, but he continued.

"Let us hope that one of the Americanos has been placed out of the running; long enough at least, until we succeed with our plans. . . . Now, knowing that the Canelon girl is held by us, it will be assumed that we are entirely on the defensive.

. . . Buenos! There is no better time than now, to strike our enemies at points where vigilance is lax, and where the one active Americano is far removed. . . . I feel that all eyes will be turned on Seibo and the hills."

He scratched his left ear and sighed heavily.

"You go and get some sleep, Mercedes my own while I pay a visit to Boca Chica. If the coast is clear, I'll slip into La Palma on the way down and take Belgarde along with me. . . . With his help, the policia will awake to a big surprise; then surprise will follow surprise so quickly, that we shall be the masters again—cierto! . . . No, dear one, El Jefe has not become an old man yet, for mañana will prove otherwise. . . . I do not know when I shall return, but while I am gone you will be the chief. . . . Manuel, here, will see that your orders are carried out—eh, Manuel?"

Ortega, elbows leaning heavily on the table, had been a silent, fascinated listener. He acceded with a nod of his head.

Mercedes arose wearily, and rounding the table, placed her hand on Natera's shoulder.

"Whatever are your plans Ramon, do be careful and avoid bloodshed if possible. . . . Remember, we are not too secure here and there is little Carlos to think about?" And though she turned from him to leave the room, he read in her big eyes that she desired to see him alone.

Without a word, he quit Ortega's side and joined her in the hallway outside, closing the door after him.

Mercedes was waiting in front of the closed door of the bedroom and she did not retreat as approaching, he swept her into his great arms.

His passionate kisses fell on her lips, neck and throat, and his murmured words acclaimed the desire in his mind.

"Ah, my darling—my own Mercedes! . . . It is long since I kissed you last; long since I undressed you and rested your white, rounded body in your bed! . . . Come, sharer of

my soul . . . let your Ramon see you serenely asleep!"

There were tears in the eyes of Mercedes when she raised her head out of his broad shoulder.

"No, no, my own big man . . . the girl is in there! Besides, there is no time for the love we once knew; those days I am afraid are gone." She hesitated and Natera felt the sob that shook her breast. "Oh, Ramon—Ramon! I fear that the time is not long hence before we shall face a firing squad at Fort Ozama; it is but a woman's intuition. . . . Why, must you risk yourself again; forget what I said about you? . . . Stay and let us plan our escape into Haiti; father will take care of us! . . . And what of the future of our little Carlos?" The light from the open door down the end of the hallway showed the great anxiety on her face.

Natera held her off at arms' length and there was anger in his eyes.

"Sangre de Cristo! . . . no! Give up now when we hold the upper hand? . . . Why, Cadeus Belgarde and I will have the policia eating out of our hands within a week!" His voice grew softer as he clasped her hands.

"Where is our little Carlos?"

Mercedes sighed fondly.

"I left him with the Cuello woman in Boca Chica."

"Buenos! Perhaps my darling, I may bring the little lamb back with me."

"Then you really intend going to Boca Chica?"

"Most certainly, and don't you worry your pretty head. . . . Now, about the Canelon girl?" . . .

"She is my prisoner Ramon!" broke in Mercedes, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "She must be left to my care, and you will use your room no more while she is with me."

Natera arched his kinky eyebrows and laughed.

"Why such sisterly interest? . . . Remember, she is the

spawn of that old lizard Canelon, and I should make her suffer."

Mercedes raised her hands to his face and cupped his cheeks.

"Listen, Ramon; you alone know why I am the evil woman that I am, and yet there are times when I question my true character. . . . Something deep within has prompted me to protect this girl, for she is not responsible for the deeds of the father. . . . Perhaps it is little Carlos who is responsible for this urge—who knows? . . . Should you complain if she behaves herself and I guard her well?"

Natera gazed down into her soulful dark eyes; read something akin to sincerity and then tossed his great head.

"Caramba! As usual, you must have your way. . . . Very well; but as you say, guard her well, for there will come a day when this girl will prove the means of saving our lives.

"Now I must leave you, querida, for the day is well advanced. . . . Make that lazy Ortega obey your slightest wish." He gathered her again in his arms and kissed her lips. "Adios, Mercedes—and do not forget, the love we once knew, is the love we shall always know—adios!" He strode across the hallway and kicked in the door of the other room. A greatly startled Ortega leaped up from the table.

"Come, hombre!" Natera ordered. "I am leaving pronto and there is much for you to do!"

CHAPTER XV

When Frank Linell awoke from heavy slumber following the crisis of a severe fever, he found himself lying in a white cot in the hospital at Fort Ozama. He was completely out of danger and his wound already on the mend, but his face was the picture of dejection. He turned his head on the pillow and gazed into the sunny blue eyes of Philip Kent.

"Yes, Phil old campaigner, I certainly made a mess of things and am hopelessly ashamed of myself. . . . That's what comes of being fat headed! . . . What business had I to let those 'gooks' carry that girl off in the first place? . . . Thought I was emulating Sherlock Holmes, I guess! Well, I had hoped the fever would finish me rather than face you."

Philip Kent, dressed smartly in khaki, leaned over the bed and grasped the free hand of his buddy. A kindly smile spread his face.

"Frank—don't say that. . . . Plans of the greatest generals miscarry, so why should a sergeant whimper? That you are alive makes me happy. . . . Of course we regret that Juanita was carried off to the hills, but you certainly gave a good account of yourself. . . . The raiding party under Lieutenant Ramirez arrived too late to prevent the get-away of Belgarde and his crowd, but they found the bodies of the men you shot. Then it was practically a miracle that Ramirez found you."

"What will be your next move now, Phil?"

Kent beamed on his friend and drew close to his ear.

"Frank, at last the mystery of Natera's hiding place is solved, and Juanita will not be a prisoner very long!" In a

low voice he recited his experience trailing Ortega into the mountains. Linell's face was aglow, then suddenly his face dropped.

"Damn it, Phil! Isn't that just my luck, lying here with a punctured shoulder when the fun is about to start?"

Kent nodded in sympathy and glanced around the ward. He saw that there were no other persons within hearing distance of him. Linell's cot was in a corner near the broad entrance to the ward, and fully a dozen unoccupied cots stretched away in even alignment. A doctor and two nurses were in consultation at the far end of the ward at the cot of another patient. He gave Linell his attention again.

"I have just returned from Headquarters, Frank, and you may surmise that I got right down to business with Morales. On the strength of the discovery of that tunnel, he promises to place Colonel Mendoza's regiment at my disposal. . . . It just galls me, having to wait until he receives the approval of President Vásquez, which is problematical; the usual red tape, you know? . . . However, I am to consult with Mendoza in Jaina and hold the regiment in readiness; and each minute is precious to me."

"And if Vásquez doesn't grant his approval?"

Kent thrust out his chin and his eyes flashed.

"I'll bolt it for Los Cordilleras alone, Frank regardless of the odds!"

A pained expression crossed Linell's face.

"Hell! And here I lie, powerless to help you!" . . . He paused and gazed steadfastly into Kent's eyes. "I know Phil; it's Juanita you're concerned about—not Natera, and you know very well Vásquez won't approve."

"Well, that depends; on a show-down he might come through," said Kent. "Juanita Canelon is a Spanish subject, and through the intercession of the consul De Gabriels, he'll have to do something." . . .

"And the good Capitán Kent has sounded a note of truth!" said a voice at Kent's elbow.

Simultaneously, Kent and Linell glanced up at the tall form of Señor De Gabriels. Balancing a cane and dressed in immaculate white duck, enhanced by a crimson tie, he had slipped into the ward unnoticed through the near doorway.

Smiling, Kent arose and shook the consul's proffered hand. There was genuine pleasure on the handsome Spaniard's face, as in turn he reached down and clasped the hand of Linell.

"Feeling much better, Sargento?" he inquired.

Linell grinned.

"Si, Señor. . . . It was nice of you, calling yesterday morning, and I am sorry the nurse would not wake me from my sleep to greet you."

"Ah, amigo, that sleep was very necessary for you." He then turned to Kent. "Congratulations on your safe return from the hills Capitán. I have just come from the office of the Secretario Morales; missed you by minutes. . . . You perhaps guess that I lodged an official complaint in behalf of the Señorita Juanita. . . . The request which you ask will undoubtedly be granted; otherwise I shall cable my government for action."

"Good!" exclaimed Kent. "Vásquez won't dare refuse!"

"Yes," said De Gabriels, "Morales told me something about your plans, and as my car is down in the compound, permit me to drive you out to Jaina?"

"Thank you, my dear consul," replied Kent readily. He then consulted the clock hanging on the whitewashed wall opposite. "It is now eleven forty-five and we should be on our way." Leaning down he crushed Linell's hand in an iron grip.

"Bear up now Frank, and you will be with me soon again. . . . I'll bring you Natera's scalp within forty-eight hours to pay up for that wound. . . . So-long!"

.

"So-long, Phil; carry on and 'call your shots' for me! When you see the Señorita, tell her I did my best."

De Gabriels waved good-bye and both men left the hospital.

The big yellow car of the consul was parked near the main gate of the fort. They walked across the white dusted compound and climbed into it. As the car passed under the low archway over the gate, a sentinel presented arms to Kent.

There was little traffic in the streets and in a few minutes the car reached Parque Independencia, and passing the ancient cemetery with its many swinging lanterns, turned into the broad Avenida, stretching away without the slightest curvature toward Jaina.

And as they talked of Kent's plans, De Gabriel's admiration for the Americano increased greatly.

"Ah, Capitán," he said enthusiastically, "I envy your ability, yes, your courage. . . . You are going right into the heart of a region where almost every native is a bandolero, or else closely associated with the life. . . . I suffer great apprehension over the thought of that innocent girl up there in the very hands of Natera himself."

Kent's face hardened.

"God help that hombre, Señor, if he lays one finger on her!"

And De Gabriels, guiding the wheel, knew that such words proved to him that Kent loved Juanita Canelon, and he wondered no more why the girl had evaded his advances that evening in Alhaja's patio. Deep down in his heart the jealousy he had borne disappeared, and like a true sportsman, he wanted this fine Americano to succeed.

The car droned along, passing wretched hovels on either side of the long avenue. Old Fort San Giranamo, overlooking the sea swept past, and soon the car rumbled over a little, wooden bridge and entered the clean looking town of Jaina. The town, a close mass of new looking adobe houses was quiet to the point of abandonment, for siesta reigned.

At the far end of the town, the white-washed walls enclosing the main barracks of the First Regiment, stood out on high ground and the Rio Jaina flowed swiftly to the west below the barracks.

The car drove up in front of the main gate, where the Dominican colors floated from a flagstaff atop the wall. Kent got out.

"Will you not join me amigo; Coronel Mendoza is quite an interesting character?"

De Gabriels was not inclined to quit the wheel.

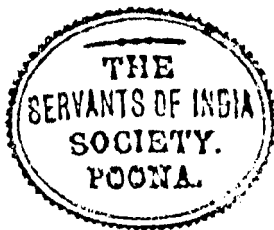
"Thank you Capitán, but I planned after driving you here, to make a quick trip to Boca Chica. . . . The Señor Canelon has been helpless since his daughter's disappearance, so I must inform him of your return and future plans."

"That is very thoughtful of you Señor," replied Kent. "I know the old gentleman must have taken the blow badly. . . . Tell him please, that if I do not return from the hills with Juanita—then I shall not return alive!"

De Gabriels nodded understandingly.

"When I return to La Capital, Capitán, I am at your service to command." And with a parting handshake, he turned the car around and sped away.

"A real fellow!" murmured Kent, and turning approached the main gate.



CHAPTER XVI

It was exactly 1:00 o'clock when Kent presented himself at the regimental headquarters office at the far end of the parade ground. Colonel José Mendoza, a noble looking, white haired officer greeted him affably and then presented him with a telephone memorandum. It contained instructions to Mendoza from the Secretary's office, to place his entire regiment under the orders of Captain Kent.

"You are to be congratulated Capitán," said Colonel Mendoza with sincerity. "Morales also said that the signed approval of the Presidenté would follow shortly. . . . At last, you will receive the coöperation you have sought for a year."

"Yes, Coronel," said Kent, "but all thanks for it are due to the intervention of the Señor De Gabriels; but may I ask when you received the message?"

Mendoza smiled, leaning back comfortably in his swivel chair behind his desk.

"About five minutes before you arrived, and because no reference was made regarding my detachment, it is assumed that I too am under your orders."

The little office in which they sat, quite bare of office equipment, looked out on the broad, white walled parade ground through two open windows. Mendoza had dismissed his office force and the two men were quite alone.

"I do not want you to understand it that way Coronel," Kent replied seriously. "All I want is the use of the regiment. . . . We are merely going to coöperate, you and I. . . . You will not be under my orders, but rather a deciding factor to my plans."

"Then you really want me to go into action with you?" Mendoza sat erect in his chair and his sharp, black eyes shone with enthusiasm. He was young for sixty years despite his white hair, drooping moustache and goatee. His skin was white, yet tanned as deeply at Kent's and there was not that drooping of the shoulders conspicuous in the aged; not broad exactly, yet square. Kent had served under him as a lieutenant just after the Occupation, and the elder officer's admiration for the American was immediate and lasting. There sprang up a great friendship between them.

In answer to the question, Kent arose and walking around the desk, placed a hand on the shoulder of his old commander.

"My dear Sir . . . taking the First Regiment into Los Cordilleras without you, is like playing cards without an ace. . . . You are its commander still, and must needs command it!

And that terminated a full understanding between them.

Removing their blouses, they went to work. Strength of the regiment was consulted, records referred to, maps poured over and sketches made. The desk was soon a litter of blue prints, pencils and paper. Plans were laid, changed and made over. Detachments were assigned here and there, marked on the maps by red and yellow crayon. At 6:00 o'clock they desisted and repaired to the officers' evening mess. In a half hour they were back at it again, refreshed and eager for more of it.

At 8:30, they had all but completed their plans, when the bell of a field telephone standing in one corner rang furiously.

Mendoza walked over to it and picked up the set. A moment of telephonic exchange and then he called Kent.

"The Secretario Morales calling; wants to talk to you."

Kent joined him and relieved him of the set.

"Yes, Secretario . . . this is Kent speaking!"

"Buenos, Capitán! . . . Please come immediately to my office! . . . I have terrible news to tell you!" Morales'

falsetto voice echoed great excitement. "I cannot say much now, but it is enough to think about . . . the Señor De Gabriels, has . . . has been murdered!"

Kent stood transfixed with astonishment. De Gabriels murdered! . . . how . . . when? His voice shook with his answer.

"Very well, Sir. . . . I shall leave Jaina at once, but we have already made our plans. The Third Battalion leaves for Seibo at midnight, but we will keep the rest of the regiment here for emergencies due to the consul's death. . . . I am sure the murder was Natera's work, so believe me that I am doing right."

There was little hesitation from Morales.

"Anything you say goes, for I am dependent now solely on your judgment! . . . Dios knows what we shall do—only hurry Kent, I need you!"

And not many minutes later, the post's official motor car roared out of the barracks, transporting Kent to La Capital. The journey was short, too short for him to adjust his thoughts. The death of the consul was incredible, and alarming conjectures over the safety of Juanita made him very miserable. His sense of love for her now was crushing his heart. He was consumed by the desire to direct the car to the hills and fight his way to her side, casting all plans and orders to the winds. Never before had his control been so shaken.

"Headquarters, Capitán!" announced the chauffeur, bringing the car to a halt with the jamming of brakes.

Kent's face was hot when he got out and he told the chauffeur to await his return.

A heavy fog hung over the city, and coupled with darkness the murk was almost impenetrable. The lamps circling Parque Colon nearby looked as small as cats' eyes, steaming and blurry and seemed a mile away. The round, blue light over the doorway of Headquarters was a pendant sap-

phire in the murk and it was with a little difficulty that he found the narrow steps of the building, wet with moisture.

An orderly admitted him to the Secretary's Office, a great high ceiled room, whose tiled floor was only bare in spots where cabinets, chairs and an incongruous collection of combined office and lounging room furniture did not occupy space. A cluster of plain electric lamps hung by a sturdy brass chain directly over the room's center.

Standing beneath the chandelier, hands behind his back and booted legs spread wide was a very worried looking Secretary of the Interior.

General J. Vicinci Morales was a chubby, sunny little bunch of activity, white of complexion and possessing a refinement which only his youthful environment in far off Barcelona could well produce. His face was red and pleasant, and though of cherubic countenance, the chin was firm and the eyes steely gray. Short in stature and with a paunch quite prominent, his uniform of khaki fitted him quite well. He bore the stars of a general on either shoulder strap.

"Ah, Capitán . . . you are very prompt!" he greeted smilingly, and in that smile was sudden relief. "Pray sit down and let me tell you about De Gabriels—poor soul!"

Kent had removed his Stetson on entering the room, and following the little man across the room sat down directly facing him across a massive desk. The room's atmosphere was rather depressing due to the closed shutters of the big windows, but he was too eager to hear about the consul to mind it.

"Quite a precipitate turn in affairs, General," he commented. "Your message was a terrible shock to me, as I had been in company with De Gabriels at siesta time to-day."

Morales leaned forward heavily on the edge of the desk and looked thoughtful.

"Dios—yes, Capitán! And such a shock that it leaves Dominicana sullied in the eyes of Spain. . . . We have much

to answer to, and when General Vásquez was informed, his last words to me, were—lend you every aid in the very necessary capture of Ramon Natera. . . . So, it is good that your plans are completed. . . . And now about the unfortunate consul. . . .

“De Gabriels spent luncheon with the Señor Canelon in Boca Chica, after which they adjourned to the study for cigars and to discuss the disappearance of the Señorita Juanita; it was then four of the hour.

“Suddenly, a mysterious stranger walked in on them. His face was quite hidden under a heavy scarf and big sombrero. . . . Because the Señor Canelon leaped to his feet and cried out the name of Ramon Natera, the stranger sprang at them, waving a long stiletto. . . . Then De Gabriels with the courage of a lion, threw himself in front of his host and grappled with the fierce stranger. In the mad struggle between all three De Gabriels was pierced through the heart. . . . The assassin fled, leaving Canelon also wounded in his arm and shoulder.”

“It was the sister, Señora Combasa, who arriving quickly on the scene, sounded the alarm you had installed in the house. The Boca Chica patrol answered it and took charge of the situation, rushing Canelon to the hospital in Marcoris. . . . Commandante Tejeda, in Marcoris sent one of his couriers to me with a full report of the situation, and then turned out his entire battalion in a vain search for the murderer. He has formed liaison with Ramirez’s detachment in La Palma, and together are working north in the direction of Seibo. . . . The Señor Canelon is resting comfortably but under great mental strain.”

Perspiration stood out on Morales’ forehead as he leaned back and threw out his hands palms up to Kent; a gesture decidedly appealing.

Kent’s face was grimly set.

“Ramon Natera has shot his last bolt, General! . . . There is no escape for him now. My only fear is, that that

devil will kill the Señorita Juanita also if we press him too hard. . . . That is why Sir, we must get down to business and act quickly!

“Coronel Mendoza and I leave La Capital at midnight with the Third Battalion. Our scouts will pick up Tejada’s command and combine, and before the sunrise of another day Seibo will be under martial law. . . . Then with the aid of this little Herrera I told you about, I’ll give Natera the biggest surprise of his life! . . . Now, I understand the Second Regiment is starting south from Santiago on manoeuvres?”

Morales had already reached out for memorandum pad and pencil to make notes. He assented quickly.

“Well,” continued Kent, impressed with his superior’s approving resignation, “no better use can be made of the Second than to have it divided into two units; one unit to descend upon Seibo south over Los Cordilleras, and the other to echelon in groups on all trails leading north into Haiti. This will prevent any possible escape of the bandoleros across the border. Also, Government craft should be instructed immediately to make it their business to watch the northern coast for a possible escape by sea.”

Kent talked on, each word a proof of his vast military knowledge. Not the least detail was overlooked in his plans to bottle up the entire Natera band.

“Capitán Kent—you are a military genius!” exclaimed Morales. “Your plans are consummately perfect, and they shall be carried out as you have directed.”

Came an interruption to the closet of the two men.

The double doors leading into the room were opened wide and an orderly stepped inside and saluted.

“Excusemé, Secretario General, but that little hombre, Miguel Herrera is outside again and insists on seeing the Capitán Kent.”

Morales smiled to Kent.

"The little fellow has been hanging around Headquarters since this afternoon; will not talk to anyone but you."

"I am glad he waited," replied Kent, "for his coming has been opportune. . . . I depend solely upon him as a guide."

"Buenos, Capitán!" Morales turned to the orderly. "Show this Herrera inside!"

CHAPTER XVII

Juanita Canelon spent her second day in Los Cordilleras without the least trepidation. The absence of the giant Natera had relieved her greatly, and the atmosphere in the little hut atop the hill was surprisingly cheerful.

Following a complete rest, Mercedes Baptista had undergone a remarkable change. Gone was her hardened exterior and she appeared quite happy; like one feeling the security and comfort of home. The tone of her voice was entirely unlike the woman of La Palma, and as she prepared their noon meal she assayed to sing "Jennico," a Haitien war song. In a rich, contralto voice she successfully negotiated the simple but patriotic air.

Juanita was deeply impressed, for she saw a better, finer nature in this strange, beautiful woman. Mercedes had permitted her every liberty in and around the hut, but cautioned her repeatedly about descending the hill.

Manuel Ortega showed himself only when he brought food to them from the men's bunk-house down near the corral. Each time he lingered longer than apparently necessary. Juanita felt a decided repugnance toward him because of his evil face, alcoholic breath and searching, covetous eyes. He would never look her squarely in the eyes, but contented himself in repeated appraisals of her body. Once he was caught in the act lingering near the door by Mercedes, who sharply ordered him to leave.

Mercedes was an accomplished cook, and the meals consisting chiefly of bread, rice, dried beef and a variety of native fruit were substantially and edibly prepared.

Late in the afternoon she gave Juanita a canvas bucket and requested that she go for water in the rear of the hut. Juanita willingly obeyed and found a large wooden tub filled with clear water against the back wall. She filled her bucket and placing it on the ground stood gazing in mute wonder at the rugged splendor of the mountains towering high above her. The air was invigorating and although the sun seemed to threaten every attempt of nature to bring health and verdure to the surrounding valley, the green of trees and spiny plant life belied any successful campaign.

And as she followed the swooping, sailing flight of a vulture high in the azure sky, she became reflective.

How must her dear padre view her disappearance? . . . Knowing the insidious hate of Ramon Natera, he perhaps thought she was already dead, or worse! . . . And Felipe Kent—dear Felipe; if she could only confirm her intuition that he was safe and that no harm had befallen the Sargento Linell, she could bear up willingly, knowing that one day she would be free! A smile erased the wrinkles in her forehead when she thought of Señor De Gabriels. Once free, she would make lover's knots of the rope that bound him to the arbor in her garden and hide it in the cherimoya tree; that is, if she could find it! Since morning her optimism rose to great heights, but was checked by the suggestive glances of the ugly Manuel Ortega. If only he would go away like the bandit leader, she could enjoy complete relief!

Murmuring a short prayer for those she loved and respected, she picked up the bucket and reentered the hut. To her surprise, she saw Ortega standing just inside the doorway of the bedroom, holding an infant child in his arms. Strange, she had not heard him ascending the hill! As she brushed by Ortega, she obtained a better glance at the child and was positive she had seen its cherubic countenance before.

Mercedes, who was busy washing bits of negligee in a crude

wooden tub, turned around and beholding Ortega and the child, emitted a joyful exclamation. Hastily drying her hands, she ran toward Ortega, holding out her arms for the child.

"Oh, Carlos—my niño chica!"

She relieved the grinning Ortega of his little burden, which at that instant set up a terrific wail. Pressing it to her bosom, she cooed to it softly, which acted like magic on the child and stopped its crying. There was undeniable mother light in the dark eyes of Mercedes as she carried it over to the bed and sat down.

Ortega turned quickly to Juanita, but the latter moved away from him, evading his greeting and joining Mercedes on the bed. She had detected an overwhelming smell of liquor on his breath and he was more repulsive looking than ever.

The eyes of Ortega followed her closely to the bed, and for the first time the women saw that he was unsteady on his feet, as he turned and started for the door. Then he stopped as though remembering something and faced them again.

"Carajo! I almost forgot. . . . Hic!" He wiped his mouth and suppressed his hiccoughs with a dirty finger pressed over his upper lip. "El Jefe send word . . . to you . . . Señora, tha' you mus' be ready to leave f'r the border by mañana . . . hic!"

There was anger in the eyes of Mercedes.

"And you carried little Carlos up the hill—drunk as you are? . . . Did not El Jefe tell you to stop drinking in camp?"

Eyes that were red and watery looked back at her in a resentfully defiant stare.

"Hic—you go to hell, woman! . . . I am Jefe righ' now . . . f'r Natera will never come back! . . . The policia have surrounded him down near Los Llanos!" He paused, swaying on his feet. "It was Tomás who came through with the baby from La Palma." Then he lowered his gaze to the shapely legs and rounded knees of Juanita drawn up on the bed by the

side of Mercedes. "Caramba! I, Manuel Ortega am the leader now . . . and I shall take wha-a' I want!" . . .

His unshaven face became fiendish and saliva trickled out of his mouth and down his chin. Spreading out his arms, he lurched toward the bed.

Mercedes quickly passed the baby to Juanita, and leaping to her feet flashed a wicked looking dagger out of her waist. She stood in front of Juanita and held the shining blade aloft.

Ortega recoiled almost upon them.

"Another step, Manuel!" cried Mercedes, "and I shall rip you to pieces!"

"Carajo!" roared Ortega, eyes blazing.

He poised for a moment, then turned about unsteadily and stumbled out of the room, slamming the door after him.

"Oh, Señora!" cried Juanita gathering the child closer, "what a vile, dangerous man!"

Mercedes relieved her of the child and placed it on one of the pillows.

"Yes—ugly and boastful when he has consumed a bottle of carta blanca. . . . Let him make good his boast when Ramon returns; but there must be some truth in what he said, for the baby would not be sent on ahead. . . . However, El Jefe will return all right; he has been in tighter places—so we must be ready for him. . . . Perhaps after tomorrow we shall be on our way across the northern border—to Haiti and freedom!"

Juanita became greatly perturbed over this, for going north, deeper into Los Cordilleras meant that the chances for her rescue would be impossible. She faced Mercedes and looked steadfastly into her eyes.

"Señora, why should you hold me, taking me away from those I love? . . . Supposing you do reach Haiti safely—what gain is there in taking me with you?"

Mercedes looked away, dropping her gaze on the child now

slumbering peacefully, a cherub in the billowy whiteness of the pillow.

"Juanita," she said quietly, (using that name for the first time) "you have been so brave and unprotesting, that if it were in my power I should say—yes, go! . . . But as my Ramon tells me—you have become, or rather will have become our last resort as protection from the policia. . . . However, no matter how long we keep you, rest assured that I shall protect you as best I can." She smiled and patted Juanita's hand. "And now, I must begin packing our things."

She slid off the bed, and going to a large chest directly beneath the open window, turned back its cover. She produced several woolen blankets from the chest and threw them on the floor. One she spread open and began placing ornaments and valuable bric-a-brac upon the blanket taken from the tall cabinet beside the mission clock.

From her position on her knees she saw Juanita studying the child. She reflected a moment, smiled, and rising went over and sat down beside the girl.

"It is unimportant Juanita, at this stage of the game, to withhold the truth concerning the baby," she said pleasantly; and grasping the girl's hands, gazed into her eyes.

"You are an intelligent woman, and a good one too, so you will understand my story. . . . It was quite plain that after noon in Boca Chica, that your wonderful faith in the Capitán Kent would not allow you to believe my ridiculous accusation. . . . That was only part of my Ramon's plans to hurt both your father and the Capitán. . . . You love Felipe Kent—don't you?" There was an inviting confidence in Mercedes' gaze and her sudden question did not seem the least irrelevant or compromising. Moreover, the cunning, designing aspect in the woman had disappeared and she was more beautiful now in a straight forward attitude than otherwise.

Juanita's limpid, black eyes did not waver. Why should she

lie, or perhaps evade the question? . . . And yet, sacred things lose identity in an impulsive admission!

"Don't ask me to admit something Señora, which if it were true, would be the deepest secret in a woman's heart," she answered softly.

Mercedes hid her smile as she bent and flicked a fly away from the baby's face, but the sparkle in her eyes lingered when she raised her head.

"I am not deceived Juanita, for I cannot forget your attitude in Boca Chica . . . forgive my impertinence, *sirvase?* . . . Despite the adverse feelings on either side, I honestly admit that the Capitán Kent is a real man; honorable, and the bravest of the brave . . . so, cherish your secret!

"I am sorry for the trouble I caused you, but in a way you will appreciate my position, I am sure, when I tell you how I became inextricably associated with Ramon Natera—my husband." . . .

"Your husband? . . . Then you are not his" . . . Juanita checked her thought.

"No, dear girl . . . not his mistress! I have supplied the word.

"We were married four years ago at the Cathedral Sacré Coeur, in Port-au-Prince. I married him because he saved the life of my father from the cruel tribesmen in the hills, and due greatly to his showing me every care and thought, I learned to love him dearly. . . . I was not aware of his bandit activities here in Dominicana until the Americano marines made it so unhealthy for him during the days of the Occupation, that he fled into Haiti and came to live with us in Hinche. . . . I prevailed upon him to quit such a life, and for a long time he helped my father cultivate cacao. But tiring of this, he spent much time with the tribesmen and soon became a Voodoo doctor."

Mercedes took note of the almost imperceptible shudder to Juanita's shoulders.

"Oh, he was not heart and soul a Voodooist; merely deceiving the child-like tribesman into thinking he was, thereby making much money out of their horrible religion. . . . But this Cadeus Belgarde—well, I cannot but admit that he was a real papalois, (Voodoo high priest) and during the ceremonies often ate human flesh. . . . He exposed my husband, causing him to return to Dominicana, for had he remained with us, he would have been butchered. . . . We did not hear again from Belgarde until he escaped from prison and joined us here. My husband was glad to have him despite the grievances between them."

"And the baby?" asked Juanita.

"Ah, little Carlos? . . . He is ours—Ramon's and mine!" Mercedes bent low and caressed the baby's cheeks with her lips. When she raised herself the light maternal shone in her face. "And, Juanita—little Carlos was really the cause for joining my husband here. He demanded to have his son with him. . . . I have turned my head away from Ramon's many crimes since that day; a victim of love for husband and child. . . . Don't look at me so severely, for if ever a woman strove to convert a man—I did. . . . Cajoled and coerced, I was led to a state of indifference and hardness; disguising my very soul."

Juanita nodded her head slowly in understanding.

"But you must realize the penalty—the responsibility for all this Señora? . . . Is it quite fair to an innocent child?"

Mercedes did not answer immediately, but when she did, great tears dropped from her eyes.

"No! A thousand times—no! . . . That has been a nightmare; my inner conscience crying out in rebuttal! I feel so small confessing my weakness, but Dios—there was such an insurmountable barrier before me. . . . I gave up! Be-

sides, the wild life here in Los Cordilleras; violent deaths, fights, cursing men and enemies all around . . . all proved no moral inspiration. . . . I have told you the truth, but I cannot blame you if you do not believe me."

Juanita did believe her. At least, in such a revelation she knew that Mercedes had been spiritually good, though the flesh was easily moulded clay in stronger hands.

Evading comment, she said blandly—"Your education is considerably above the average, Señora?"

Mercedes wiped her tears with the backs of her well shaped hands and smiled somewhat wearily.

"Well, I owe what little I possess to Pere Joliet, at school in Port-au-Prince, and I have read considerably also. Ramon has a wonderful collection; he is quite a student, barbaric though he appears. He taught me my Spanish. . . . This Cadeus Belgarde speaks several languages and is a graduate of the Universitie de Toulouse. He was an officer in a French regiment in Africa, and I am sure it was there that he learned the practice of Voodoo. . . . It is hardly believable that a man of his cutlure should sink to such a degrading level, but of course that can be attributed to morphine."

Juanita's interest was aroused.

"Do you know much about his career?"

"Not a great deal, but such as I know does not matter now if told, for the whole military world knows it.

"He killed a brother officer in Morocco while drug crazed and became a hunted thing over three continents. How he reached Haiti, nobody knows, but he came with his present name. France evidently ceased to bother with him, and with abandon he masqueraded around as a Voodoo doctor. He became a free agent until the Americano marines sought him out because of his cruel, devilish activities in the hills, captured him and sent him to prison. . . . How he escaped from prison is another mystery, but he proved a great asset on join-

ing us. The entrance to our tunnel was created through his engineering skill."

"He must be a very dangerous man, Señora—a devil in fact," offered Juanita deeply impressed.

"Yes, and no. For years he used morphine, but in such a scientific manner that he has enjoyed fairly good health. . . . When he is amply supplied with the drug he is a polished gentleman, but once denied it, he becomes as you say—a diablo! When he craves for morphine, nothing is too low or violent for him to deflect his desire until he obtains it. . . . Now you are acquainted with all of us."

Mercedes then left the bed and was about to resume her task of filling the blankets, but changed her mind and walked across the room to the door. She opened it and faced Juanita, a pensive expression on her face.

"I am going down to the men's quarters, Señorita and talk with Tomás. . . . I am just a bit concerned over Ramon and want to verify that evil Ortega's report." She laughed lightly. "Should Cadeus Belgarde walk in on you . . . just look in the middle drawer of my husband's desk and ask the Frenchman to help himself to the reserve supply of morphine kept there. You will have a most charming gentleman to entertain you after that. . . . But seriously Juanita, do not leave the hut until I return."

Juanita grimaced as the door closed after Mercedes.

CHAPTER XVIII

Alone on the bed, Juanita fell to musing, gazing down on little Carlos, who apparently dreaming, beat the air with a chubby fist.

So, she was the last resort in saving the bandit leader and his wife from capture? . . . In that case, she was sure her life would be guarded—treasured rather! . . . How would dear Aunt Combasa view the situation, if in her place? She would be imperious of course, demanding an immediate release in the name of Spain—dear soul!

The door of the room creaked slightly, but Juanita was unmindful of it, until a repeated creaking and the grating of its hinges as it swung slowly inward, caused her to look up in expectancy. What she saw in the doorway brought a startled, fearful look into her eyes.

Manuel Ortega, seemingly more drunk than ever stood there, staring at her with wild, blood-shot eyes. His dirty white camisa was open at the throat, displaying thin, knarled sinews and flat, kinky haired chest. He was bareheaded and oily, unkempt hair hung in sticky looking tufts over his birth-marked forehead.

Suddenly, he kicked the door shut with one foot and then advanced toward the girl, hands outstretched like talons and with a look penetrating and lustful in his eyes.

Too terrified to scream, Juanita sprang from the bed and sought refuge behind the big desk in the middle of the room, sliding the chair back out of the way. Gripping the edge of the desk, she waited tense with fear.

“Ah, flor chica!” muttered Ortega, showing his yellow teeth

in a lascivious grin. "You want to play with Manuel—huh?"

He shuffled unsteadily toward the desk, laughing in glee over the girl's helplessness. Saliva trickled out of his thick, cruel mouth, down over his bristly chin, while the reek of liquor from his hot breath permeated the room.

Ortega's smile vanished, sensing her next move, and in its place appeared such wanton desire that Juanita, failing to scream again, trembled and froze to the desk.

The drunk crazed man crouched and then sprang fully across the top of the desk, one talon reaching out and tearing away the upper part of the girl's dress from shoulder to waist, exposing her ivory white arm and breast. Quickly, his other arm encircled her waist and his eyes fed lustfully on her bared skin. Lying atop the desk as he was, he held her immovable for a moment, but already Juanita's senses were leaving her and she sagged downward.

With a passionate—"carajo", Ortega was at the point of lifting her toward him, when the door burst open and Mercedes Baptista ran into the room, followed closely by Ramon Natera.

"Ramon my own," she cried over her shoulder, "if you love me—kill that beast!"

Ramon Natera swept past her and with the bellow of a bull, pounced on Ortega.

Instantly released, Juanita sank to the floor.

Lifting Ortega bodily off the desk, Natera carried him as easily as a mother cat her kitten; a great bundle of terrified man flesh. It was an amazing feat of strength, for he used but one hand. So carrying his burden he moved toward the doorway, pausing to pick up his rawhide whip coiled on a nail in the wall with his free hand. Jamming Ortega through the doorway, he called back to Mercedes.

"This lizard will never see the sun of mañana! . . . Go and tend the girl!"

Once outside the hut, Manuel Ortega sobered sufficiently to

realize his peril, for he began to whimper and blubber, crying out for mercy.

"Blood of Columbus!" roared Natera, throwing his burden from him on the grass. "There is no mercy for you now Manuel! . . . there cannot be two chiefs in Los Cordilleras, and you cannot tell La Señora to go to hell! . . . First you shall have a taste of the whip, just like little Herrera!" And raising the long, black whip he snapped it down on the head and shoulder of the whimpering man.

The blows sobered Ortega almost completely, for he leaped to his feet and stumbled down the hill, crying in pain and despair.

Natera pursued him and each time Ortega cried out for mercy, the great whip whirred through the air and caught him on some part of his body. No longer was he a drunken man, but a panic stricken, pain crazed creature fleeing for his life. Each step brought a crack of the whip and at the foot of the hill the terrible onslaught was too much to bear. Shrieking in agony, he sank down in the grass directly in front of the bunk-house.

A few of the band hearing the cries, came running out of the house, but stopped quite close on seeing their leader.

Ortega's shrieks diminished to dismal groans. His face was a hidden, bloody mess.

Natera stood over him and thrust the loaded end of the whip into his riding boot.

"So you are the great Jefe, Manuel? . . . Well, so be it! Go and take charge of Julio, Antonio and Santiago down in hell!" With a laugh, he drew his pistol from the folds of his red silk belt and placing its muzzle against Ortega's temple, pulled the trigger. A choked whine issued from Ortega and he rolled over heavily in the grass. He had paid the price for stepping into another man's shoes too soon.

"See, hombres!" cried Natera to the other men, who had re-

treated to the doorway of their quarters with the pistol's explosion, "just a warning to those who doubt Ramon Natera's authority! . . . Take him away and let the vultures feed on his worthless carcass!"

Two of the men moved forward quickly to do his bidding, but apparently changing his mind, he waved them back.

"Caramba—no! . . . Let him cook in the sun a while!" And moving toward them, asked—"Where is Tomás?"

One of them pointed toward the corral just as the tall Tomás himself climbed over the corral railing and approached the group. There was a surprised look on his lean, dark face as he elbowed his way through the men and faced the bandit leader. Ostensibly he had witnessed the killing of Ortega for he assayed no glance at the body.

Natera pulled out his whip and spreading his legs wide played with it, running it through his hands.

"Listen you men! . . . Tomás here, knows what I was up against down Los Llanos way, and it has reached a point where the policia have the upper hand, forcing us into defensive action. It is useless and foolish for us to remain here any longer, so I, and all that is mine shall be off over Los Cordilleras tonight, headed for Hinche."

Surprised murmurs passed among the men and they exchanged bewildering glances.

"You mean—you are leaving us, Jefe mio?" queried Tomás quietly.

Natera grinned enigmatically and shrugged his huge shoulders.

"Well, that is up to you Tomás, and the rest. . . . The Spanish consul has been murdered and they are blaming me and my bandoleros! . . . Murdering a Dominicano is soon forgotten, but a Spanish official—that is very much different. . . . Before another day, a regiment or policia will be occupying Seibo, and then it is but a question of time when we

shall have been surrounded and captured. . . . Now is the time to leave, so if you want to escape a firing squad, come along with me—but decide pronto!”

The men studied each other in silent speculation for a space, then looked at Tomás, appealing for advice. The tall one deliberated, cognizant of their faith in his judgment.

Natera watched him closely, for despite an egotist's belief in his own incomparable qualifications, never once was he afforded the opportunity of calling this quiet, intelligent looking one a fool. Moreover, he respected his proficiency with a pistol.

“Why jump from the frying pan into the fire, Jefe mio?” asked Tomás at length. “Do not forget there is also a regiment in Santiago to reckon with, and I think it is safer here than moving toward the border. . . . Have we not always fooled the policia—si, even the smart Americanos?”

Natera scowled darkly under his kinky eyebrows and twisted his whip nervously.

“Cierto, Tomás,” he agreed. “Of course we have outwitted the policia time and again, but when a whole regiment pours through Los Cordilleras, how long do you think we can hide from them? . . . As for the regiment in Santiago, it would take three days for it to reach Pedro Sanchez, and once we are across the Sanchez Valley, I defy four regiments to find us. . . . Do not talk like muchachos; either you come with me or stay! I have told you my plans and that is enough!”

It was plain that the men were impressed, and because Tomás nodded his head approvingly to them, they chorused assent.

“We believe you are right, Jefe mio,” said Tomás with finality. “We shall go with you; what are your orders?”

Natera smiled but there was little expression of pleasure.

“Buenos! I appoint you, Tomás teniente. . . . Have the men pack up and clear the corral. We must be ready to

leave by the rise of the moon. . . . Send four horses up the hill to me before supper." . . .

"But what about the other men down on the Seibo road and the guards at the tunnel?" asked Tomás, not greatly impressed by his sudden promotion.

"Carajo! Let them take care of themselves! . . . Somebody has to be used to cover our move. Now get going pronto and take with you only that which you need most; we must travel as lightly as possible." He glanced down at the still body of Manuel Ortega. "And take care of this lizard—he has cooked mucho!"

Snapping his whip in the air, he turned about and climbed the hill. At the top he turned and looked back. He saw the men gathered in a close knot, evidently exchanging viewpoints between them. Suddenly they dispersed with the tall Tomás waving his hand in the direction of the corral. Two of the men picked up the body of Manuel Ortega and carried it away.

Chuckling, Natera strode into the hut.

He found Mercedes washing the baby Carlos, who splashed in a tub of water near the window and gurgled in infantile glee. Juanita Canelon lay on the bed with a mosquito netting draped over her. A wet cloth was pressed across her forehead and she lay quite still with closed eyes.

Mercedes lifted the baby out of the tub and sat down with it in her lap.

"Well, Ramon," she greeted while drying the baby with a cloth, "I heard the shot and I suppose it was for Ortega?"

"Si, Mercedes; Manuel is on his way to hell!"

"Dios rest his filthy soul!" she exclaimed.

Natera standing over her, laughed outright.

"Carajo; imagine Ortega with a soul!"

Mercedes raised a finger to her lips and then pointed to the bed.

"Sh-h, Ramon! The girl has been shocked and noise will do her harm."

Natera arched his forehead and wagged his great head, an attitude made ludicrous by the twitching of his puggy nose.

"Hell! Then place Carlos with the girl and come outside; I have much to tell you."

Mercedes hurriedly completed her drying and wrapping the baby in another cloth, tip-toed over to the bed and gazed down on Juanita. The latter was slumbering now and although little color showed in her cheeks Mercedes was rather awed by the innocence and beauty in her face.

Placing the baby beside the girl, she tip-toed away and followed the bandit leader outside.

Natera squatted in the grass directly in front of the outer doorway and Mercedes sat down on the step facing him.

"What do you think happened down in Boca Chica?" he began.

"Enough to make us pack and run away," Mercedes replied quickly.

"Enough?" he echoed. "If Spain doesn't enter the chase, I'll eat a tarantula!"

"What do you mean?"

Natera regarded her coldly and clawed up a tuft of grass.

"Cadeus Belgarde stabbed the Spanish consul to death!"

Mercedes stared at him wildly.

"Santa Maria! . . . How?"

Natera scratched a growth of beard.

"Well, I joined Belgarde in La Palma after playing hide and seek with a big patrol of policia. Garcia's woman was there also with our little Carlos, so I sent Tomás back with him. . . . Tomás had a hard job getting through. . . . Then Belgarde and I started for Boca Chica and as we rode along I explained to him that we should take our time as old Canelon would not be home from the plantation until after 2:00 of

the hour. But the Frenchman had forgotten to take his morphine that morning, and being very nervous wanted to hurry. I gave into him, for you know only too well how dangerous he becomes without the drug.

"We encountered another patrol near the Marcoris Highway, and the time taken hiding from it brought us into Boca Chica after 3:00 of the hour. We tied our horses down near the beach, but I had been thinking hard after seeing so many policia around, so I told Belgarde I had abandoned my plan to kill Canelon.

"He became like a crazy man, craving his morphine of course, and swore and raved so badly that I was glad the beach was deserted. . . . To my surprise he told me that if I should not kill the old man, he would. . . . I told him to stay and watch the horses, if he felt that way about it, as I would go through with it myself. But he had a strange light in his eyes and he pulled his hair and snapped his teeth like some wild animal. . . . It was dangerous to leave him alone in such a condition, for he began crying that Canelon was his victim, and by drawing his heart's blood for Voodoo he would have better luck. Then he made the Voodoo death sign.

"There was only one thing to do. . . . I let him go. He looked like the papalois of old about to make a sacrifice; such a diablo! . . . Wrapping a handkerchief about his face he headed for the Casa Alhaja, his step like a cat.

"He was gone about twenty minutes and when he rejoined me, he looked greatly relieved, almost calm. There was blood on his camisa, so I knew he had killed the old man. But to my amazement, as we rode quickly away, he informed me that he had not killed Canelon, but another man who was visiting him . . . the Spanish consul, De Gabirels. I asked him how he knew it was De Gabriels, and he said that he had sold the consul a horse about a month ago, transacting the sale through Garcia.

"Caramba, mujer! I became like a crazy man too, knowing that in the murder of the consul, every means would be taken to track us down!

"We reached the Marcaris Highway, and of course Belgarde's first thought was to return to the rancho for his morphine. . . . Now, the rancho had already been raided with a loss of half his horses, and the woods around La Palma crowded with policia. . . . I reminded him of this, but it was useless. He leered at me like a devil and told me to go to hell; that all the policia in the world could not keep him from his morphine. . . . Again I let him go, promising to wait overnight for him in Seibo.

"Reaching Seibo, I put up in the hut of the witch, Dominica Gara and waited for him, but he did not come. . . . It was plain that the fool had been captured, so at sunrise I headed for Los Cordilleras."

Mercedes stood up. Her face was pale and she showed great agitation.

"Ramon! All is over for us. . . . De Gabriels' murder means our deaths—and that soon!"

"Not if we get over to Hinche, querida."

"Si! Run away into Haiti, where the Americano marines will find us more easily than the policia. . . . However, perhaps that is the best we can do. . . . Padre will find us a hiding place—but what about the girl?"

Natera leaped to his feet and his yellow eyes gleamed angrily.

"Carajo! All hopes for revenge on our enemies are gone, yet the death of Canelon's girl should be a little recompense—eh, querida?" His right hand toyed with the butt of his revolver.

Mercedes reached down and clutched his hand.

"What, Ramon! . . . You would kill that innocent girl after what has happened?"

"Si, mujer—and why not?"

Natera turned his head and saw the tall Tomás running up the hill toward them. In silence they awaited his approach. He reached them quite out of breath.

"Bad news, Jefe mio!" he cried, catching his breath. "Garcia just came in with a report from Ferdinando, that a battalion of policia passed through Higuey at 6:00 of the hour this morning, headed for Seibo!"

Natera's eyes started from their sockets and he turned quickly to Mercedes.

"Dios! They missed me by two hours! . . . We must get away at once!"

Mercedes' face was ashen, but she had been thinking, thinking hard. Suddenly her eyes shone with a new light.

"Ramon! Do you think the Capitán Kent is with that battalion?" she asked calmly.

"Cierto! Who, but he would bring such a force into the hills so soon?"

Color raced back into the cheeks of Mercedes.

"Then, we shall not run after all! . . . Do not ask questions but have Tomás go and double the guards at the tunnel—then come inside with me!"

Mystified, but offering no objections, Natera sent Tomás on his way and then followed Mercedes inside.

CHAPTER XIX

The somnolent town of Seibo received a most unpleasant, early morning shock, when Colonel Jose Mendoza and his battalion of Policia Nacional, roared into town in seven, heavy motor trucks.

There was little time for all possessed of a guilty conscience to escape to the hills, for the wily old officer posted his sentries and sent out patrols with such despatch, that within a half hour a complete check-up of the entire populace was made from the steps of old Concepcion Church.

The proprietor of the Café El Toro, was politely but firmly ordered to close his bar to all thirst quenching natives and the establishment was commandeered as Headquarters. The big gaming table far back in the long room, once the resounder to rolling dice, was littered with blue print maps, showing the topography of the north country.

Colonel Mendoza sat facing Philip Kent across the sea of blue, and Lieutenant Juan Ramirez stood nearby in company with two other aides, awaiting the disposition of their superiors. A sergeant-major occupied a field desk in one corner making out reports, and two orderlies stood at ease near the open door. The morning was cool and comfortable but the air was filled with the noise and bustle of khaki clad men performing their duties.

Colonel Mendoza was talking.

"A courier just came in from Santiago, Capitán. Dura's regiment expects to reach Pedro Sanchez by nightfall tomorrow. . . . That will be well timed with our operations."

Kent nodded approvingly.

"Your detail work has been splendid Sir. No important points around Seibo have been left unguarded and your first field order proves that you have not forgotten our plans." He turned in his seat and called Lieutenant Ramirez over to the table.

The smart little officer responded quickly.

"What did you find out in La Palma?"

"The Capitán Tejada had little to report to me Sir. . . . His scouts had chased a bandolero all the way north from the rancho, but lost him near Hato Mayor. . . . Owing to the hour that the bandolero was first discovered, it could be assumed that he was the one who murdered the consul."

Kent frowned slightly.

"Too bad Tejada lost him; probably was Natera himself. . . . Where did you send Miguel Herrera?"

"To the Officer of the Day, Sir."

"Did he spot any bandoleros during the check-up?"

"Four. . . . Two he has definitely identified, but he is not so sure of the other two."

"Relatives or friends of his perhaps; well, you had better take charge of the little fellow personally, Teniente. He likes you and will do as you say. . . . I do not want him skipping off to the hills prematurely; to pay his respects to Ramon Natera, using his dagger as a calling card."

Ramirez smilingly acceded, saluted and withdrew.

Kent then gave his attention to Mendoza.

"When do you expect our northern patrol back from fifteen kilometer post Coronel?"

Mendoza consulted his watch.

"Within a few minutes; the second patrol is standing by should the first be delayed. . . . Now, about the cane workers. . . . I think it best to permit them to leave for the fields, don't you?"

"Yes; no need to hold up progress, since the fields are east."

A heavy step sounded at the doorway and a tall enlisted man attempted to pass inside. He was detained by the two orderlies, who after questioning him, brought him forward to the table. Black as a Nubian and wearing sergeant's chevrons, the newcomer snapped his hand to the salute.

"The leader of the first patrol reports, Coronel."

Mendoza and Kent gave him their attention.

The sergeant appeared rather nervous, and it was plain despite his warrant rank, he did not relish talking to officers.

"Sir; we reached fifteen kilometer post and were suddenly surrounded by twelve bandoleros. They had the advantage of cover and it would have been suicide to open fire. . . . But instead of making us prisoners, as I expected, their leader gave me this message to deliver to the Capitán Kent, el investigardo." He produced a folded sheet of paper out of his shirt pocket and held it out. "We were then ordered to ride back pronto to Seibo."

Kent reached forward and took the paper, a penisve look on his face.

"Were the bandoleros well armed Sargento?" asked Mendoza.

"Yes, Sir—and well supplied with ammunition."

"Well, Sargento; hunting bandoleros is very serious business. . . . The fact you were surrounded did not permit your quitting, since you had them outnumbered. . . . Indeed, the fact that you did not open fire would have been suicide but for that message. Natera has enough mouths to feed without taking prisoners. . . . Report to the Officer of the Day your experience, and say that I want you re-examined on your warrant!" And as the sergeant turned on his heel, Mendoza called across the room—"Make a note of this, major-sargento!"

Lighting a cigar, he awaited the pleasure of Kent. The

latter had spread the paper out in front of him and was reading a surprising message. . . .

“Capitán Felipe Kent;

The Canelon girl dies at sunrise mañana, unless my wife, child and I are granted entire immunity for all crimes laid at my door. I am ready to confer with you, or any official regarding banishment, but a sure guarantee of faith must be established.

“If you send a messenger, have him wear a white cloth around his sombrero and he will not be harmed. I await until sunrise your reply. No reasonable answer—spells death to the girl. Perhaps it will help my position to inform you that the Frenchman, Cadeus Belgarde killed the Spanish consul.

“Seriously, I am,

“Ramon Natera.”

Kent met the inquiring look of Mendoza as he raised his eyes from the letter.

“A truce, Capitán?”

The serenity of Kent's countenance deceived the old officer. Not the least trace of the great emotion felt within him over Juanita's peril showed in his face, for such had been his training. Without answer, he passed the letter across the table.

“Rather bizarre, Sir?” he commented, when Mendoza finished reading it, and glanced up with wide open eyes.

Mendoza hunched his shoulders, drew several puffs of smoke from his cigar and then thoughtfully appraised his junior.

“Bizarre—yes, but original—no! . . . The great Vicentico sent the same sort of truce to Peynado, before the days of the Occupation. . . . Of course you know the story; how that bandolero grande was duped into surrendering and then ruthlessly shot?” And with Kent's nod of acquiescence, he

continued. "And because of the Government's treachery, no bandolero in Los Cordilleras since, feels that his occupation is not just and honorable. . . . Perhaps history is repeating itself, but I firmly believe that Ramon Natera will not be tricked as was Vicentico."

Kent offered no word to this, but fell into deep thought.

Mendoza puffed away in silence. His admiration for this vastly intelligent Americano increased with each moment of contact, and he knew that such sudden abstraction was significant of a mind in volcanic action.

A sage smile suddenly illumined Kent's face and his blue eyes sparkled.

"Your face tells me Capitán," said Mendoza, breaking the silence, "that you have hit upon another ingenious plan. . . . Are you going to outwit Natera?"

Kent toyed with a red crayon in front of him.

"Yes, Coronel. . . . If the great Vicentico fell victim to a crude plot, intelligent man that he was, then Ramon Natera is no less gullible."

"Quite true Kent, but I repeat—he will not be tricked. However, I will gamble you have something deep up your sleeve; some clever plan."

Kent did not answer immediately, but turning called to the sergeant-major.

"Present my compliments to the Teniente Ramirez and ask him to send me a horse and one combat hand grenade ready for service." And with the departure of the surprised non-com', Kent excused his interruption and replied to Mendoza's declaration.

"No, Coronel. . . . I have an inspiration, but no set plan. . . . As soon as Ramirez tends to my wants, I shall be off to Los Cordilleras to interview Ramon Natera."

Mendoza tossed away his cigar and stared across the table.

"What! You propose to go directly to that diablo without

at least some promise to him? . . . This letter requires hours of careful thought and the immediate coöperation of the Secretario in deciding an official issue!"

Kent pushed back his chair and arose. Placing his fists on his hips, he surveyed the agitated Mendoza. His face was serious and there was a far distant look in his eyes.

"Sir! Juanita Canelon's life means more to me than my very own, and she will die at sunrise tomorrow if Natera is not impressed with my answer! . . . This is no time to meddle in red tape. Natera's back is to the wall and he plainly tells me so. . . . It is a long ride into the hills, but during that ride I must hit upon a sensible plan to save that girl, and I shall!"

At that moment the sergeant-major entered and walked directly up to the table.

Mendoza arose quickly.

"But Kent, dear friend! You are going unarmed, your pistol will be taken from you! . . . Supposing Natera is lying?"

Kent observed the sergeant-major standing by his side, holding a hand grenade in his hand. How the men obtained it so quickly surprised him, but he reached out and relieved him of it. Then he faced Mendoza.

"In that case Sir, I shall kill the devil!"

"How . . . with what?"

Kent thrust the hand grenade almost under his superior's nose.

"With this—of course!"

Mendoza recovered from his astonishment and laughed aloud.

"Capitán, your resourcefulness is amazing! . . . You will carry with you the protection of a company of soldiers, but how will you conceal it?"

For answer, Kent examined the corrugated, war gray ball

of steel. He unscrewed the detonator with deftness and care, saw that the grenade was correctly charged, and replacing the detonator with more care, unbuckled his breeches. To the surprise of all, he placed the grenade in a pocket especially sewed long before this, inside the crotch of his breeches. He then spread his legs wide apart for examination.

"Just a little satchel I have used before Coronel . . . quite natural and deceiving—eh?"

The remaining aide had approached from curiosity, and witnessing it all, joined with Mendoza in much laughter. There was a smile on the sergeant-major's face also, as politely he retired to his desk.

"Buenos, Captán!" cried Mendoza. "That will avoid detection easily, unless Natera's men go looking for the needle in the straw."

Producing a white handkerchief, Kent tied it around the band of his Stetson. He then removed his holster and pistol and placed them on the table.

"If I do not return by sunrise mañana, Coronel, you will know that I was forced to use the grenade, or else the needle in the straw was discovered. . . . Consequently, you must move with all haste into the hills. Miguel Herrera will guide you through the tunnel. . . . Natera will not be far away, for Dura's regiment will have blocked the trails through Pedro Sanchez. . . . For the rest, I leave to your keen judgment. And if you find me dead—and that you will, if the Señorita Canelon has fallen victim to Natera's threat, the Sargento Linell, my assistant, knows what to do."

Mendoza drew up his form, clicked his heels together and raised his hand to the brim of his Stetson.

"Americano grande. . . . I salute you! You have the courage of a lion! God be with you!"

Kent grasped the old officer's hand warmly, and likewise shook the hand of the deeply impressed aide.

“Adios, caballeros!” He turned on his heel and left the room.

The sun was directly overhead as he mounted a waiting horse outside, and shifting the hand grenade upward to insure comfort in the saddle, he trotted away to the north. His mind was centered entirely on Juanita Canelon, and he knew that to reach her side at this crucial time, would prove to her a love that found its inspiration on the beach in Boca Chica.

A little figure clad in white cotton, sprang out into the road from concealment behind the ruins of Concepcion Church. It was Miguel Herrera and he stood in the middle of the road, gazing after the departing American.

First, he scratched his head in perplexity, and then suddenly uttered a fierce Dominican phrase and stamped his feet angrily in the dust.

CHAPTER XX

The evening sun, a great, flaming red ball, dipped its lower edge to the tallest peak of Los Cordilleras, rested but a moment and then disappeared beyond the purple and gray ridges.

The emblazoned horizon of red and gold, against a panel of turquoise blue, lent a colorful splendor to the mountain stronghold of Ramon Natera, in its wild and verdant freshness, recompensing perhaps for the torrid heat of day.

Contrary to its usually listless appearance, the camp was a scene of much activity. A knot of men worked diligently between the corral and bunk-house, loading all four footed animals with packs and pieces of furniture. The saddle horses tied to the corral fence bore smaller burdens behind the cantles of straw saddles, and two unhealthy looking bullocks had been harnessed to an ancient, two-wheel cart near the bunk-house doorway and it was being rapidly loaded with various utensils and supplies.

Ramon Natera leaned against one of the corral posts and overseered the loading in general, calling out in loud tones to the sweating men. He was dressed in black corduroy breeches and gray shirt, and his riding boots were crossed, one over the other. In place of the wide, red sash was a buckled leather belt well stocked with cartridges. Two, American looking holsters swung from the belt, supporting pearl handled pistols. His face was shaded by a huge sombrero and in one hand he held his coiled, rawhide whip. There was an exceptionally stern expression on his yellow countenance and his forehead was corrugated with worry.

As he diverted his attention from the men and gazed over his right shoulder, he saw a small cloud of gray dust ascending skyward near a knoll above the camp where the trail led up into the forest. The dust cleared away and three black dots appeared on the knoll, moving on toward the camp. He turned completely around to watch them, and as he waited they grew into plain semblance of three horsemen.

A voice from the working men, gruff but respectful, called out to the bandit leader. It was Tomás and he walked toward him.

"The last burro is packed, Jefe mio!"

Natera ceased watching the approaching horsemen, and leaving the corral fence met Tomás half way between the bunk-house.

"Buenos!" he said almost pleasantly. "Have the men ready to move out at dark, and don't forget when you reach Hinche, keep the men hidden until you get in touch with the Señor Baptista. . . . I shall wait here until morning and then we, La Señora and the guard will follow after you."

"Does the Señor Baptista know we are coming?" asked Tomás.

"Yes, he has been expecting us since my last letter. . . . Follow the same directions I gave you last night and you will not run into any trouble."

Tomás nodded in understanding, and turning barked out sharp orders to the waiting men, who immediately began assembling the animals in a double file on the far side of the bunk-house. In so doing they were partly screened from view of the three, closely approaching horsemen.

The gorgeous sunset had waned to watery pink and slate blue as Natera walked beyond the bunk-house into the trail and awaited the arrival of the horsemen. They were only a pistol shot distant, and already he had recognized the familiar lines of two of the horsemen, who were his own men.

The rider between them was unmistakably a stranger. Suddenly he espied a white band around the sombrero of the stranger and a uniform of khaki, and as the distance diminished, his eyes started from their sockets.

"Sangre de Cristo!" he muttered. "It is the Americano—Kent!"

The horsemen came on at a trot and pulled up in a cloud of dust in front of the bandit leader. All dismounted, and Philip Kent with an expressionless face stepped forward flanked on either side by his guards. His blouse was unbuttoned and his right hand clung to the belt of his breeches. They stopped three paces before Natera.

An introduction was plainly unnecessary, but the air was charged with tension. Neither had faced the other before, yet lucid descriptions gave to both a full knowledge of the other's appearance.

They appraised each other speculatively, comparing characteristics which they had memorized. Neither appeared disappointed, yet Natera was apparently the more impressed. There was an amused expression on his parchment face and his yellow eyes were snakelike in potency. They became cold and narrowed, as perhaps he realized that here at last he was confronted by the only man who had repeatedly frustrated his plans.

Kent experienced no feeling of trepidation as he coolly returned the steely gaze, but he could not but admire the enormous size and strength of his enemy. Here was no mountain of flabby, top heavy flesh, but a giant of muscle and bone. The pearl handled pistols and rows of cartridges did not escape notice, and it was with no little relief that the fingers of his right hand, still clinging to his belt, felt the rounded head of the hand grenade hidden in his breeches.

Natera stood, legs wide, quivering with excitement and his big, ham-like hands permitted the rawhide whip to pass

through them repeatedly. A surging passion urged him to reach out with his gorilla arms and squeeze to a pulp this damnable Americano, who had the temerity to walk right up to his face. The urge was weakened as he read the positive courage in those clear blue eyes.

Came a break to the mental innuendo, when one of the guards moved nearer and whispered in Natera's ear.

"This capitán has come in answer to your message, Jefe. . . . We have searched him, but he comes unarmed."

Natera elbowed the man roughly aside and a cunning smirk lit his face.

"Salud, Capitán! I welcome you to my humble estate. . . . The surprise of seeing you, of all men, is indeed overpowering."

Kent's face bore no signs of geniality.

"It is growing dark, Natera," he said in even tone, scanning the sky. "Is there no place where we may talk privately?"

Natera grinned enigmatically and wet his thick lips.

"Ah, Capitán! Your manner is hardly fitting for one who has entered the lion's den!"

Kent shrugged his shoulders indifferently and smiled weakly.

"That of course is a matter of conjecture, hombre. The sun of mañana may find us neither here nor there, perhaps nowhere . . . who can tell? . . . There is no love between us, so why waste time in preliminaries?"

A puzzled frown clouded Natera's face; a fair semblance to an approaching storm.

"You speak wisely, or else like a fool!" he said savagely. "But come, follow me up the hill to my hut." He then growled orders to the two guards. "Turn your horses into the corral; you will not go with Tomás, but wait for orders from me!"

Tomás and his little calvacade escaped notice as Kent followed Natera up the hill.

A gray mantle hung over the little valley and night was approaching as they reached the top. Before they entered the hut, Kent glanced back down the hill, and then he saw the pack horses and mounted men just entering the trail. This told him that Ramon Natera had decided plans of his own.

A yellow light shone from the window of the hut, but no sounds issued out as they passed inside. The thought smote him forcibly; was it possible that Juanita was not here?

They groped their way along the narrow corridor, Kent touching Natera's back for guidance. He was surprised that the latter disregarded an attack from the rear, and it was very hard for him to resist just that.

Light flooded the corridor as the bandit leader kicked open a door. It shone from a large oil lamp standing on a wooden keg in the middle of the room.

The room had been cleared of all furniture with the exception of the big, four posted bed standing in its original place and several boxes and kegs, apparently left for seats.

A woman arose from the bed where she had been sitting, sewing on a green felt bag, which she tossed aside on one of the pillows. It was Mercedes Baptista and she stood transfixed with wide, staring eyes at the sight of Philip Kent standing beside Natera. The latter closed the door and turned toward her.

"A little surprise, Mercedes, querida! . . . Our friend, the Capitán Kent, has paid us a call, and he will do nothing else but talk business!"

Mercedes continued to stare as she reseated herself almost mechanically on the bed.

Kent had eyes for only one person, Juanita Canelon, and

because he discovered at a glance that she was not in the room, he turned almost savagely on Natera.

"Where is the girl?"

Natera slapped his big hands together and smiled across the room to Mercedes.

"Why, Capitán mio, only a few moments ago you mentioned something to me about wasting time with preliminaries; is the shoe on the other foot?"

Kent suppressed his anger, for he knew that personal emotions or feelings meant nothing here. He walked across the room and sat down on a keg a few feet from Mercedes. Glancing back to Natera who remained standing near the door, he said coolly—

"Since I have come to bargain for the life of the girl, it is only fair that I should see her; to determine if she is all right. . . . Finding her well and sound would prejudice me in your favor."

Before Natera could make reply, Mercedes spoke quickly.

"Oh, Capitán, the girl is perfectly all right! She is in the other room and I will go and get her."

Natera raised his right hand in a gesture of protest to her.

"Caramba, mujer! Stay where you are! . . . Capitán—you cannot see her until after we talk business." He strode over near Kent and the keg he chose as a seat crackled when he sat down. "Time enough to look the girl over when we have decided terms. . . . Now, what have you to offer?"

Kent's face was flushed, and if ever he longed to shoot out a grievance with a man, he did at this moment. But the only weapon available was the hand grenade, and suddenly remembering it, he crossed his knee to avoid a possible discovery.

Mercedes' hands were clasped in her lap as she watched him through narrowed lids.

Realizing that he was in no position to be obdurate, and spurred on by the desire to see Juanita, he began telling the biggest lie capable of his imagination. On its credence alone depended his life and that of Juanita Canelon!

CHAPTER XXI

"I read your message with much surprise, Natera," he said slowly, looking the big man squarely in the eyes. "But what you have demanded is not entirely unreasonable. Dominicana will be glad to get rid of you, no matter how. . . . There is no question that you hold a winning card—a queen, and I can do nothing more than offer you a show-down. . . . What I offer is in authority as I am in command of the troops in Seibo.

"First, I must have material proof to your statement that the Frenchman, Cadeus Belgarde murdered the Spanish consul."

There was no mistaking the sudden gleam of hope in the eyes of the bandit leader as he looked at Mercedes.

"Tell him, Ramon!" cried she from the bed, slightly excited. "Tell him about Cadeus and his morphine, and how he killed De Gabriels! You would be telling the truth!"

Natera rubbed one thigh with the back of his fist and jerked his head toward Kent.

"Yes, that is the truth, and once Belgarde is found, all that is necessary to make him confess, is keeping him from his morphine. . . . Do you know anything about the Frenchman?"

Kent availed himself of an opportunity to encourage confidence. He reached up and rubbed the back of his head, smiling amusedly.

"All I know about him, is that he has no respect for my head. . . . Did he use a bar of iron the day he knocked me out in the Calle General Lupon?"

Mercedes laughed outright, a proof that she was human.

"Oh, Cadeus took his life in his hands that day, amigo, but you were a bad one to have hanging around!"

"More than likely it was my life he took in his hands, Señora," answered Kent, noting that Natera did not appreciate the touch of humor.

"Better for me had he done a finished job and my biggest trouble would have been eliminated," said Natera grimly.

Then carefully, guardedly, he told of the incident resulting in De Gabriels' death, but he lied purposely in explaining the reason for his visit to Boca Chica.

But Kent realized that Natera was covering himself, although he believed the violent part played by Belgarde.

"Well then, it remains for the Frenchman to be captured," he said with finality. "However, as I said before, his guilt must be firmly established."

Natera chuckled loudly.

"Oh, one week in the carcel for Belgarde without his morphine, and he will not only confess the truth, but tell you many interesting things that France would like to know." . . .

"The Frenchman's past does not matter—France can wait; it is Spain whose demands must be satisfied," said Kent seriously. "Dominicana wants Belgarde dead or alive, and it is up to you to get him. . . . When that is done, I can promise you agreeable negotiations for your own safety."

Natera's yellow eyes gleamed like topazes in the light of the lamp and he began biting his lower lip nervously.

"And what are your negotiations, Americano mio?"

Kent's side glance found Mercedes sitting erect in an expectant attitude. He had never seen her so beautiful before. He lowered his eyes to the floor thoughtfully.

"As soon as the Frenchman is found, and the Government satisfied as to his guilt, you and La Señora will be placed on the first available ship bound for the United States, and in turn transported to Spain under charge of two policia

officers. . . . These officers will bear credentials proving your true emigration to that country and a sealed, official record of the trial and sentence of Cadeus Belgarde for the murder of De Gabriels.

"After your arrival in Spain, you will be free to pursue your lives as you so desire, providing you do not visit any port in the West Indies. . . . I cannot assure you how long the Spanish authorities will permit your stay, but there our negotiations end.

"That is my proposition, and that is all I can safely offer."

Natera had dropped his head on his great chest and studied his feet. Through his brain ran the first thought—deception! Vicentico had been tricked, and Vicentico had more friends than he! Such a proposition had its possibilities, however, for in Spain, with his wealth, he could surmount all obstacles; live like a grandee and attend the bull fights!

When he raised his eyes, he looked at Mercedes inviting comment.

"What do you think, flor hermosa? . . . What have you to say to such a proposition?"

Mercedes had been boring Kent searchingly, and for a moment ignored the question. She too, thought of Spain; beautiful Madrid, and safety. But could the offer be true—clear of subterfuge? What guarantee was there of good faith? The face of the Americano was a striking enigma, and though she summoned all the intuition of woman, she could not fathom those clear blue eyes and quiet, good looking countenance. When she spoke, her words were slow, carried by sustained thought.

"The proposition is entirely fair, Ramon, and if honestly carried out, is sufficient payment for the release of the girl. . . . We must, however, have a decided guarantee of good faith. Rather we shoot the girl and fight to the last, than be duped into walking to our deaths!"

She reclined against the bed-post and tilted her chin in speculation.

Kent was undaunted by the show-down, for he had been thinking hard. All he desired was an armistice; time to make other plans!

"That, Señora, is quite simple to insure yourselves against. . . . Do you think for a moment that I am trifling with your intelligence? . . . Perhaps I might deceive Natera, but you—impossible! Of course you must have guarantee and my plan it this—

"Given sufficient grace, you, Señora, could take charge of the girl and place her in hiding with you. . . . When you have decided that your hiding place is really safe, Natera will be notified of the fact, and will then surrender himself to the authorities. In a way, it will be a game of 'blindman's bluff;' and your men need never know the turn in affairs. There must be secrecy on both sides.

"While you are still holding the girl as hostage, Natera will be placed aboard ship and sent to the United States under escort. . . . You should arrange a code letter with him to send you after his safe arrival in the United States or in Spain. . . . This alone will be convincing proof that we have carried out our end of the bargain. . . . Once you have received such a letter, I shall expect you to deliver the girl to me. . . .

"Now, I think I can read what is in your mind. . . . You think that after leaving your hiding place and reporting to me, you will be thrown into the carcel. . . . Save yourself such worry! You have no criminal record, excepting the act of holding me once a prisoner, and aiding in the kidnapping of Juanita Canelon. That will be forgotten if you have taken good care of the girl. . . . I pledge you—on the day she is delivered to me, arrangements shall be made for your safe passage to Spain to join Natera."

Mercedes had been an interested listener and it was quite apparent that she was impressed. She arose from the bed quickly. Her face was flushed and her big eyes sparkled with undeniable joy as she walked over to the bandit leader and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Do you hear, Ramon?" she cried. "There are great possibilities to the plans of El Capitán!"

Natera had remained silently pensive during the discourse, but when he gazed up at Mercedes there was doubt on his parchment face.

"Caramba! It is not sound querida! . . . However, your judgment is greater than mine. . . . If you agree to it—I am satisfied."

Mercedes bent down and gathered his great head to her breast.

"I am satisfied, Ramon!" she whispered in his ear. "Blood of the devil! Just let them harm you, or fail in their bargain . . . and I will cut out the girl's heart and bring it to them!"

Natera pushed her away gently, and when he looked at Kent it was plain that he was decided.

"Capitán, we accept your terms. . . . But for my own safety, you must hunt for Cadeus Belgarde yourself. He is hiding somewhere between here and La Palma. . . . You may return to Seibo, and in three days at the most, I shall surrender to you, but to you only. Should Belgarde come here within that time, I shall make him a prisoner and bring him along with me. . . . Now, the first indication of sincerity on your part, will be the evacuation of your policia from Seibo before sundown tomorrow."

Kent arose, greatly pleased with his evident success.

"Very good, Natera. I am glad you and La Señora are sensible. . . . The policia shall be withdrawn from Seibo

with all possible haste, and in three days I shall look for you to surrender to me in La Capital.

"Now, it is my turn to ask for your first indication of sincerity. . . . Let me see the Canelon girl and permit me a few moments alone with her? If you do not understand—I think La Señora does."

Natera had arisen and was standing by the side of Mercedes. The somewhat pleased look on his face changed instantly.

"You may see the girl, but I will not leave you alone with her!"

Mercedes grasped his arm.

"Come—come, Ramon; what harm is there in leaving them alone for a few moments?" And raising on her toes, she smilingly whispered in his ear: "the Americano loves the girl—that is all!"

Natera laughed almost good naturedly. Then shrugging his shoulders, he engaged her arm and led her toward the door.

At the open door, Mercedes turned and called back to Kent.

"I will send the girl to you, but all I can grant you is ten minutes alone with her . . . indeed, that is an eternity!"

A moment elapsed after the door closed and Kent had just time to exult over the success of his mission, when Juanita Canelon entered. She closed the door after her and leaned against it, gazing with wide open, joyful eyes at him. She wore a plain, pink cotton dress, loaned her possibly by Mercedes, and because of their like forms, it fitted quite well and was becoming. The mountain air had given much color to her face, and her luxuriant, raven hair was braided, and the great strand hanging over one shoulder, lent an unusually youthful touch to her beauty.

For a moment, it seemed she could not find her voice, yet

her dark eyes betrayed her emotions. Kent saw that the woman before him was unmindful of all else but the great joy surging in her heart over his presence and her manifest love for him.

With face flushed with joy, he ran toward her.

"Juanita! . . . Juanita! Oh, dearest—I feared so for your safety!" He caught her extended hands and kissed them tenderly, fervently.

She pressed toward him, gazing deeply into his eyes while her rounded breast vibrated with feeling.

"Filipe! . . . Felipe Kent, dear one!" she fairly whispered. "What are you doing here?"

He did not answer, but unhesitatingly gathered her into his arms and kissed her quivering red lips, her forehead and cheeks.

She failed to restrain him; he, the first man possessing the courage to attempt such liberty. How could she? . . . It would have happened on the beach in Boca Chica but for that wild shot, for she had sensed the pleasurable nearness of him; unusual, exotic, yet strangely natural withal, and she knew that her response would have been willing! . . . Undeniably, he was her man—her Americano!

He held her tightly now and kissed her lips again—willing lips; much as though he had found something he had lost. She grew slightly weak and clung to his neck, pressing her burning cheek to his.

Resisting a passionate impulse, he found the pink lobe of her ear and murmured softly—

"Juanita darling! . . . I love you! . . . I love you; that is why I am here! You were to die at sunrise tomorrow unless—unless I could do something to save you, and I have done it!" He had lost command of Spanish, but his English was equally eloquent. "Say that you love me, beautiful girl—that I am yours?"

She opened her eyes fully, soulfully truthful eyes, and answered him quickly in English.

"Yes, Philip, my American. . . . I do love . . . I do! Rather—I am yours, yours forever!"

But before he could cover those tender lips with another kiss, came a sharp knock on the door, followed by the voice of Mercedes.

"Time is up, Capitán!"

Kent released Juanita reluctantly.

"One moment more, Señora, sirvase; just another moment!" he called back.

"Caramba!" sounded Ramon Natera's heavy voice.

"Another moment then, and that is all!" answered Mercedes.

Swiftly, Kent whispered to Juanita what had transpired after her capture and part of the negotiations he had made with the bandit leader. She was sorrowfully moved learning of the death of De Gabriels, but when told of the safety of her father and Frank Linell, her face became joyful again.

"And you must be brave, dear," he added, "for my promises to Natera bear little truth. But you will be free before another day has passed, or my love for you means nothing."

Juanita's look was very encouraging.

"My happiness is overflowing, Philip," she said, holding his face in her hands. "I have no fears now, knowing those I love are safe, and that you are watching over me. . . . Do be careful." She stood on tip-toe, kissing each of his blue eyes as the door flew open and Mercedes and Natera walked in.

The latter wore a pronounced air of suspicion, looking from one to the other.

"Carajo, Capitán! Come . . . our business is of more importance than to permit you an evening of love making!"

My men are waiting outside with horses, and they will escort you back to the Seibo road."

Kent dropped Juanita's hands unwillingly . . . whispering, "courage, dear!" and with his eyes wistfully following him, he disappeared quickly through the door.

CHAPTER XXII

It was with stubborn reluctance that Kent rode away between his two guards, and it was not until they had climbed the farther side of the dark valley near the plateau did he realize forcibly, that the temporary success of his mission was virtually no success after all. As surely as the freedom of the moon hidden behind a great cloud above Los Cordilleras, so was the freedom of Juanita Canelon; expected, but when! Despite the accomplishments of staying her fate by subterfuge, he was too sensible to think otherwise than carrying out the program outlined to Ramon Natera, unless! . . .

"Come, Capitán!" called the guard on his right. "Pull up your horse and dismount. . . . We must blindfold you and tie your hands again."

They had reached the top of the plateau, black in the shadow of the high mountain peak towering over the tunnel entrance.

Kent was surprised at the quick passage through the valley, and although he obeyed the order it was impossible for him to see the tunnel entrance and verify the need for the guard's demand.

Holding his horse's head he awaited the move of the guards, one of whom took the reins from his hands, while the other held out a rope to him.

Suddenly, as the moon, a silver disc, crept out of the big cloud and exposed the plateau, a white figure hurtled itself out from concealment behind a big rock near the yawning mouth of the tunnel and fell upon the guard holding the

horses. A dagger, gleaming bright in the moonlight rose and fell twice on the back of the unwary man and with a deep groan he fell heavily to the ground.

"Pronto, Capitán!" shouted the sudden attacker, "get the other hombre!"

The other guard had dropped the rope held in his hands and drew his pistol. But Kent, quicker by seconds in realizing what it was all about, closed in, and knocking the pistol up with his left hand, drove a terrible right hand punch against the guard's jaw. The blow found the vulnerable spot, for the latter sank down by the side of his fellow.

And then as the little white figure bent over his victim, Kent recognized Miguel Herrera. The latter raised his head and looked over at him.

"That was a good blow, Capitán! My man is dead. . . . You had better tie yours."

Kent removed the guard's pistol belt, and bringing the hands of the inert figure behind its back tied them securely.

"What the devil are you up to, Herrera?" he called out.

Herrera grunted, leaned back on his heels and wiped his dagger with tufts of grass.

"Caramba! I saw you leave Seibo, and fearful that I might be cheated of my chance to pay Natera back for his wrongs to me, I followed you into the hills!"

"Yes," replied Kent, somewhat coldly, "but your sudden attack on the guards has spoiled some very good plans of mine. . . . Why did you do it?"

Herrera's white teeth gleamed in a grin.

"Ah, Capitán, because, with these two fixed as they are, it leaves Ramon Natera down there in the valley alone—alone for you and me to kill!"

There was more warmth in Kent's reply, for he could not deny the courage and prowess of the little fellow.

"Listen amigo—you are wrong! . . . There are at least

fifteen bandoleros awaiting word from Natera in the forest trail below. . . . I know, for I saw them leave camp."

A laugh greeted this.

"You are partly right, Capitán, but they are not waiting for Natera. . . . They have already passed here and are headed over the northwest trail toward Pedro Sanchez, and they were not moving slowly either."

"Are you sure, Herrera?"

"Si; so sure that I was able to count them easily from the plateau here. They took with them nearly all the horses and pack animals. . . . Why, I can tell you almost where every member of the band is located. . . . I repeat, Natera is alone down in the valley, with perhaps his woman Mercedes and the Canelon girl."

Kent was agreeably impressed.

"But how do you know about Mercedes and the Canelon girl?"

"Well, I only know what the sentinels told me on the other side of the tunnel and down on the Seibo road."

"You mean, they let you through?"

"Cierto! . . . They are still my friends, and they knew it would please me also to be told that my worst enemy, Manuel Ortega, had been killed by Natera."

Ortega killed! Kent was surprised. He knew that Herrera had been too closely associated with the Natera band to make a mistake in judging the situation as he had. If it were true that Natera, Mercedes, and Juanita were the only ones down in the valley, no greater opportunity lay open to him to free Juanita and possibly capture Natera! With Herrera's aid they could escape contact with the sentinels, and the two guards lying at his feet would furnish the weapons and amunition needed! Weighing such possibilities, his enthusiasm became great. He reached over and thumped Herrera on the back.

"Herrera, you are a real little man! Yes, we will go down and get Natera."

"Buenos, Capitán! It will be easy for us!"

At this moment Kent's victim moved and sat up. Herrera jumped over to his side and brandishing his dagger, menaced him with terrible threats to keep still.

Kent relieved the dead guard of his pistol and spare cartridges and did likewise to the other. Then with the aid of Herrera he gagged the living guard and also tied his feet.

"Now you had better secure the horses, Herrera." The latter obeyed, leading them into a clump of cajuillas bush. He returned, and together, they carried the two guards into the bushes and concealed them from sight.

"Herrera," said Kent, "you told me something about possibilities of dynamiting this end of the tunnel so that the entrance could be blocked?"

"Si, amigo, come with me."

The little fellow walked over toward the big rock that had concealed him near the tunnel entrance. Kent joined him, and stooping down Herrera felt around under the rock and pulled out over two feet of white cord rope.

"This, Capitán," he said holding it up, "is the fuse leading up to the dynamite buried over the tunnel door. . . . When the dynamite explodes all the earth and rock is supposed to fill up this end of the tunnel. . . . It would take twenty men hours digging a new entrance."

Kent took the fuse and examined it.

"Let me have your dagger!"

Somewhat surprised, Herrera handed over his weapon.

Kent then struck a match and touched the bright flame to the end of the fuse. As it ignited, his face beamed in a smile of satisfaction in the sputtering, bluish light.

Astounded, Herrera started to run away, but Kent detained him.

"Do not be alarmed. . . . I am not going to explode the dynamite—watch!"

He selected a place several inches beyond the burning end of the fuse and drew the dagger's edge through it. The severed end dropped to the ground, burned a few seconds longer and then went out.

"There, I am satisfied that the fuse is good," he said, tucking the rest of the fuse under the rock. "Let us hope the dynamite functions as well."

Herrera commented approvingly.

"Now, I am going down to Natera's camp alone and make him my prisoner," said Kent. "You remain here to watch for the possible return of any bandoleros through the tunnel. . . . It is to be expected that they will come in before sunrise, and that is why we must work fast. . . . Here are some matches. . . . When you hear three shots fired by me in rapid succession, touch off that fuse; wait at safe distance until the dynamite explodes, and then join me down in the valley. . . . I will leave you one horse, but come pronto, for I shall need you to help tie up Natera and his woman. . . . Do you understand fully, amigo?"

Of course Herrera understood, but hell! He had come expressly to Los Cordilleras to kill Natera, even though he had helped the worthy Americano—and now because of it, he would be cheated of his revenge! Natera would be taken away a prisoner to Fort Ozama and suffer an easier death by the rifles of a firing squad. . . . Ah, well—perhaps, after all, there might come an opportunity to slip his dagger into Natera's heart when El Capitán was not watching—bien!

"Well, amigo?" queried Kent impatiently.

"Si, Capitán, your plan is good; blocking the tunnel will give us plenty of time to escape. Yet the only way out is over Los Cordilleras to Pedro Sanchez, a long, dangerous passage."

Kent smiled in the darkness.

"I know, but by dawn, Coronel Mendosa and his battalion will be ready to come looking for me, and finding the tunnel blocked on this side, they will naturally dig their way through. . . . Teniente Ramirez has been well instructed how to get here, so all we have to do is hold the fort until they come."

Herrera chuckled and rubbed his hands.

"Bien! Then I shall await your three shots, Capitán mio."

Kent strode over to where the horses were secured, and leading one out, mounted into the saddle.

Riding along the plateau, he guided his horse down the long, sloping hill. Reaching the forest below, he found it quite difficult making progress along the trail, but the valley floor was reached without mishap. He urged his horse to a lope, and soon the deserted looking corral and darkened bunk-house of Natera's camp came into view. The moon was high overhead when he rode up to the bunk-house and it bathed the camp in a sea of silver. Yellow light from the hut on the hill glimmered like some lone beacon, and shadows from the high Cordilleras gave an eerie appearance to the scene.

He tied his horse to a wooden peg imbedded in the rear wall of the bunk-house and drawing one of the pistols taken from the guards, he stealthily entered the house, and by the aid of moonlight through the one open window, discovered the place entirely deserted. He returned to the door-step outside and sat down.

Producing the other pistol, he laid both by his side and made careful examination of them. With the eyes of an expert he found that they were excellent weapons and of the same calibre. Removing the cartridges from each in turn, he pulled the triggers several times with easy, gradual squeezes to ascertain the amount of slack to the trigger catches before the hammers fell. Quite satisfied, he peered through each

barrel, looking at the moon through the bores and found them quite clean and "unpitted." He was astonished that such serviceable weapons had been so well cared for by the bandits.

Replacing the cartridges, he arose, and keeping both pistols in his hands, he started moving slowly up the hill toward the hut. He paused now and then to listen, but the air was stilled.

Suddenly realizing that he was too much exposed in the moonlight, he continued the upward climb on his knees and elbows. A thought that if he failed to take Ramon Natera by surprise might jeopardize the life of Juanita, caused him to sink lower in the grass, and he reached the top of the hill on his belly.

So quiet was his surroundings, and so colorful the yellow light streaming out of the window of the hut amidst the shadows, that he compared the scene to a pastoral nocturne hanging in the reception room of Juanita's home in Boca Chica.

The moon lost itself behind a curtain of gray clouds directly overhead, as with much labor he reached a corner of the hut.

Keeping his pistols well out in front of him, he wormed noiselessly along the wall until the lighted window was reached, then flattened down on the ground as a footstep sounded near the outer doorway. A woman emerged from the dark hallway and sat down on the door-step. He swore silently, for the sight of the woman meant complications.

He tightened his grip on the pistols and was on the point or sliding backward, when the moon emerging out of the clouds shone down fully on the doorway. The woman raised her head to the moon and he thrilled as he recognized the beautiful face of Juanita Canelon. It was inevitable now that he would be discovered, but when he saw Juanita arise

without a glance in his direction and walk around the opposite side of the hut, he nearly cried out with joy.

Dropping his Stetson on the ground and raising up very slowly, he lifted the cloth hanging over the open window and peered inside. He saw Ramon Natera and Mercedes seated close together on the bed, and on the floor at their feet was a great heap of gold and silver coins in a blanket, garnished here and there by crisp American currency. They were in the act of separating the money, placing silver or gold into two canvas sacks in clinking handfuls.

"You will take care of the bills Mercedes," he heard Natera say. "It is easier for me to care for the coin." Then he heard Juanita's footsteps approaching around the other side of the hut. Sliding down upon his knees, he crawled beyond the window to the welcoming darkness of the doorway just as Juanita rounded the corner.

"Sh! . . . Juanita dearest!" he whispered when she approached the doorway. "It is me—Felipe!"

Juanita, very much startled, stood transfixed a moment. She came nearer however when Kent thrust out his head in the moonlight.

"Felipe!" She was too surprised to call loudly, but eagerly crept into his arms. "Why have you returned . . . and what are you doing?"

"Softly, dearest!" he cautioned. "There has come a sudden change to my plans and I have taken advantage of it! . . . Natera's men are not in camp, so I have come back to capture him! . . . You must go down quickly to the corral and wait for me; there may be some shooting and I want you out of harm's way!"

"Oh, Felipe! You are not going to risk your life against that terrible man? . . . I should rather await the results of your original plans than have you do that! Please, dear—go while there is yet time!"

Kent patted her cheek.

"No, Juanita—obey me, please! . . . There is no great risk and little Herrera watches at the tunnel. . . . It is too late to turn back and this is the greatest opportunity in my career. Seconds now are precious!" He raised her chin and kissed her lips.

"Very well Felipe," she replied readily, "I obey you."

She left his embrace rather reluctantly, and acting on her own wise initiative, crawled silently past the window and descended the hill. Her heart was gripped with fear over his immediate danger, but she thrilled to his daring courage and the simple but new "obey me".

Kent cocked both pistols and getting down on his elbows and knees, crawled very slowly through the black hallway. He located the door of the bedroom and stood up. Then raising the latch by slow, even pressure, he kicked the door open and leaped inside.

CHAPTER XXIII

For the first time in all his turbulent career, Miguel Herrera experienced that sense of apprehension which comes to the average human soul alone at night in a wild country and in the presence of the dead. And yet he was not entirely alone, for close to the dead bandit lying in the bushes was his fellow, very much alive despite the gag in his mouth and the rope that bound him.

There came periodic relief however, when more often than apparently necessary he quit his post at the mouth of the tunnel, ostensibly to ascertain the security of one, but virtually to relieve thoughts of the other. The two horses left behind were immovable as statues, standing side by side a few feet away from Herrera's charges.

Eerie sounds floated up to his ears from several directions in the great forest and valley below the plateau and they made his nerves twitch. Of course such sounds could be birds in their sylvan retreat, or great lizards night prowling, to be sure! But would El Capitán never fire his pistol and end such suspense?

Again he paid a visit to the live prisoner, but as he was returning to his post, three pistol shots very faintly audible and fired in rapid succession, ended all further mental strain. Eagerly he dropped on his knees behind the big rock and groped for the dynamite fuse. He found it, and striking a match ignited the fuse. Then dropping the sputtering blue end, he scrambled to his feet and ran to safety near the horses in the bush. Anticipating the effects of the explosion, he reached up and held their heads.

Bright sparks illuminated the rear face of the rock but disappeared as the fuse burned its way over the top of the tunnel entrance to the dynamite charge.

Keyed to hectic anticipation, Herrera waited seconds—minutes, but there came no explosion. He deliberated ten minutes longer before deciding that the fuse had failed. He had witnessed Ramon Natera attaching the fuse to the charge and overheard him say that five minutes burning would bring contact. Yet despite this knowledge, it required some time before he was able to muster sufficient courage to approach the tunnel entrance to investigate the failure of the fuse.

But before climbing up the steep face of the cliff over the tunnel, he peered into the black mouth of the tunnel. He remained immovable as his eyes centered on a pencil point of red light, like that on the burning end of a cigaret at night. It was far, far away down the long, stygian passageway and it was moving onward, waving and bobbing.

“Carajo!” he cried, realizing at once what it meant. “Fernando and his guards are coming in!”

All thoughts of the fuse were forgotten as he turned and ran over to one of the horses.

He must go to El Capitán! He knew that the dead bandit and his live companion hidden in the bush would escape notice of the other bandits coming through the tunnel and that he had at least ten minutes lead on them.

Leading his horse out on the plateau, he mounted up and rode down the hill. Reaching the valley below, he dug in his heels and the horse cantered on. He disregarded the danger from bending boughs of trees and bushes flanking the trail and did not change his gait until the bunk-house in Natera's camp loomed up in front of him. Then he trotted past it, failing to observe Juanita Canelon running in through the doorway, and continued on up the little hill to the hut on top.

He dismounted at the lighted window, tied his horse and

pulling aside the curtain looked into the room. His beady, black eyes danced in excitement.

Seated on a wooden keg was Ramon Natera, his Herculean back to the window, and arms crossed behind him. His great head was dropped downward on his chest in a dejected attitude.

On the bed lay Mercedes Baptista, face downward buried in a pillow, beating the pillow with her fists and sobbing hysterically. The door of the room was ajar, and behind it sat Philip Kent, knees raised before him with two pistols resting on knee caps. One pistol was aimed at the breast of the bandit leader, while strangely, Miguel Herrera found himself staring into the muzzle of the other.

Again was his admiration heightened for this Americano, for he had heard him coming up the hill and was ready for him! Chuckling in great glee, he called out—"Don't shoot, Capitán mio!—Shall I come in?"

"Yes, pronto!" answered Kent, lowering his right pistol slightly. "Bring some rope with you!"

Herrera left the window at once, and going to his horse found a long halter-shank coiled on the cantle of the saddle. He then joined Kent.

Kent arose at his entry, but kept his pistols covering his prisoners.

Ramon Natera raised his head, and observing Herrera, scowled maliciously.

Mercedes turned over and sitting up on the bed ceased crying. She gazed with tear stained face at the new arrival.

Herrera took no notice of them, but gave his attention to Kent.

"The dynamite did not explode, Capitán, but worst of all—Ferdinando and some of the guards are coming through the tunnel!"

Kent failed to exhibit his disappointment over such a sudden reversal to his plans.

"Are they riding?" he asked calmly.

"No, that at least favors us. . . . It will take them almost an hour to get here. The other horse and those two guards are well hidden in the bush; Ferdinando will not see them."

"Buenos! Take your rope and tie up Natera, but keep behind him."

A strange light, apparent ecstasy shone in Herrera's eyes. It did not escape Kent's notice, nor did the tightening of his hand around the hilt of the dagger protruding from his belt pass unobserved.

"Herrera!"

"Si, Capitán?"

"I want you to give me your dagger until I see fit to return it to you!"

Herrera, in the act of approaching the bandit leader, turned sharply about and faced Kent, legs spread widely apart, and his eyes glaring balefully. For a moment he forgot that the Americano was his friend. Reaching up with his free hand, he tore open his camisa, exposing a great livid scar across his chest.

"Do you see that, Americano?—That is one mark made by this Natera's whip which the witch, Dominica Gara could not remove! . . . Would I come all the way up from Seibo to kiss this diablo for licking me? Carajo—caramba! . . . no! I am going to have my revenge! . . . Order me to do anything else, but stop me in this, and I" . . .

He did not finish the sentence, but turned again and sprang at Ramon Natera, raising his dagger high.

Kent swung one pistol over to fire, but with a terrified scream, Mercedes Baptista leaped from the bed, scattering the pile of gold and silver at the foot of the bed over the floor, and with the spring of a tigress threw herself between Natera and

the rushing Herrera. The latter's dagger, aimed at the breast of Natera, descended with a swiftness that fairly took Kent's breath away, but instead of reaching its intended mark, plunged to the hilt in the breast of Mercedes.

With a slight moan she sank to the floor, a red stream pouring out of her wound.

Kent held his fire as Natera, recoiling from the unexpected attack, fell backward over the keg.

Herrera stood transfixed, holding the blood stained dagger, dripping, and gazed in horror at the dying woman on the floor.

Natera regained his feet clumsily. His yellow eyes stared wildly about and he seemed dazed; standing erect, a giant rendered speechless. Then a deep groan escaped him as he looked down on the beautiful, white face of Mercedes. His shoulders drooped and great tears trickled down his cheeks. Suddenly, he stepped forward and knocking Herrera aside with a sweep of one arm, he dropped beside Mercedes and raised her tenderly in his arms.

His blow sent Herrera hurtling against the wall. The little fellow shook himself and again came that strange look in his eyes.

Kent walked over to him.

"Give me that dagger Herrera—I tell you! Have you not done enough harm?"

Herrera hesitated, but wiping the dagger on the back of his trousers, he unwillingly passed it over.

"Capitán, I am sorry I stabbed the mujer! She has done me no harm!"

"Well, had you obeyed me at first, it would not have happened. . . . As it was, she saved me from shooting you in the arm."

Herrera said no more, but crossed over to the doorway and stood silently watching the two on the floor.

Natera was bending closely to the face of Mercedes, great

sobs shaking his body. She was whispering to him and Kent faintly heard her words.

"It is just as well now, Ramon, my own, as later! . . . There is no great pain and darkness is descending! . . . I can at least die in your arms, dear husband, although I cannot see you very well."

Her voice grew fainter.

"Go to your death bravely, Ramon, and soon you will be with me again! . . . Where? We cannot tell! . . . Ask El Capitán to find our baby Carlos, in Pedro Sanchez, and send him to my father in Hinche. . . . This is my dying wish—that you offer no further resistance, but face death unflinchingly, dear one! . . . Kiss me quickly Ramon! It is growing darker and I fail to see you anymore!"

Natera, his face streaming with tears, bent lower and kissed her lips again and again, her forehead and her hair.

"My world is lost to me, flor hermosa!" he mumbled. "I do not care to live without you! . . . Yes, I shall go to my death bravely, for I am helpless to do otherwise! . . . Good-bye—good-bye!"

The limp body in his arms quivered suddenly and then gradually stiffened. Her big, dark eyes did not close, but stared up at him, bright but sightless.

He knew that she was gone from him, the only being in all his violent, adventuresome life that he felt any love for. To obey her every wish, to lavish his attentions upon her and to love her as best he knew how, was his only diversion from the path of banditry.

He gathered her tighter in his arms and as easily as picking up a babe, he arose and carrying her over to the bed, laid her gently upon it. A pool of blood marked the place where she had fallen. He returned to the spot and tearing off a large piece of his shirt, stooped down and dried up the spot with it. Then he placed the rag, blood soaked as it was, inside his

shirt against his skin and over his heart.

Kent, alert now for the mad storm he anticipated, received an astonishing surprise in the tone of the bandit leader's voice as he turned toward him.

"Capitán—with her death, death for me is welcome! . . . My life has ended right here, and my spirit is so broken that I have not the heart to crush that Miguel Herrera over there, as you would crush a mango, for in a way, his attempted revenge on me was justified. . . . But, Dios! Would that I were lying on that bed in her place! . . . She has been a good woman; your Señorita Canelon can vouch for that. . . . So I ask you in behalf of her kindness and protection to the girl, that you will seek out my son in Pedro Sanchez and send him to the Señor Baptista in Hinche?"

Kent was amazed at the quiet, reconciled mien of this great hulk of a man, who indeed could crush both him and Herrera as easily as he said. His reply was sympathetic.

"I am very sorry over the death of La Señora, for had she lived, she would have been merely deported. . . . Yes, for her kindness to the Canelon girl, I shall find the baby and send it to the Señor Baptista." Then he called to Herrera. "Take your rope, amigo and tie him!"

To the contrary of signs of fear, Herrera strode boldly up to the bandit leader from behind, and bringing the latter's arms behind him proceeded to tie him. Because Natera submitted without a murmur, he became the object of much chiding. But Kent cut him short.

"Enough of that! You should purge your hate in the blood of that poor woman! . . . Hurry now, for those other bandoleros will be here soon."

Herrera said no more and finished his tying. Then he guided Natera back to a keg and pushed him down upon it.

Kent shoved his pistols inside his belt.

"Now, Herrera, do you think you can return to the Seibo road right now without being seen?"

A reproachful glance greeted this.

"How, now amigo, do you think I was able to come and go from here many time before? . . . Caramba! I could pass those hombres coming in with ease!"

"Very well; do as I direct and Dominicana will be proud of you. . . . Return as fast as you can to Seibo; you should arrive there hours before sunrise. Go directly to the Coronel Mendoza and tell him just how I am situated up here. . . . He will send me help immediately, and with you guiding them they will arrive in time to save the day.

"Now, as you pass the corral on your way down, look for the Señorita Canelon and tell her to come back up her immediately. . . . Better take my horse along with you and hide it in the forest."

Astonishment spread Herrera's lean face.

"You are going to remain here alone?"

"Yes; it will be much safer here than trying to get through with you. Besides, I do not care to risk the life of the girl. . . . It will be quite easy for me to hold off those bandoleros coming in, for there is only one side of the hill to watch, which gives me the greater advantage. . . . I'll keep them busy all right until you and the policia arrive . . . will you go?"

Herrera's face became grave.

"What a brave hombre you are Capitán. . . . Of course I shall go, but it is for you and the girl and not for Dominicana!" He paused, glancing at the body on the bed. "Believe me amigo, I am sorry for the Señora Mercedes; she was always nice to me."

Ramon Natera raised his head from his chest and looked over at the little man starting for the door.

"So be it Miguel," he said quietly, "but all this would not

have happened had I finished my job on you with the whip."

Herrera poised on the threshold.

"El diablo! The firing squad at Fort Ozama will not fail in their job on you, big man; sorry I did not save them the trouble!"

With a laugh and "adios" to Kent, he was gone.

Silence reigned momentarily in the little room, broken by Kent, who walked over to the side of the bed and reaching across the body of Mercedes, caught the far end of a sheet and turned it back over her. As he turned about, Natera spoke.

"One more promise, Capitán, if you will? Will you see that my wife is laid in the ground?"

Kent strode over to him and circling behind looked over the rope that bound him. Herrera had done a good job.

"Yes, Natera," he replied. "Better than that; she will receive the customary government burial."

"Thank you, good Americano . . . thank you!"

The dull sound of footsteps reached Kent's ears just outside the window. He jerked out one of his pistols and covered the window. The footsteps passed the window, grew louder as they struck wood coming along the hallway and Juanita Canelon stepped gingerly into the room.

Seeing Kent, she came over to him quickly her eyes shining. Her braid of raven hair had become a mass of riotous curls. She had suffered little from her experiences; in fact she glowed in youthful vitality.

Kent caught her outstretched hands and led her away from the bed, but not before she had taken note of the sheet covered figure.

"I heard a terrible scream Felipe, and—and" . . .

"Yes, dear. That was Señora Mercedes . . . she is dead!"

"Dead?" Her beautiful face registered astonishment.

"Yes. She tried to save her husband from the dagger of

little Herrera, who came to revenge himself, and by accident received the blow."

Juanita's eyes dimmed and much color went from her face.

"Oh, Felipe—how tragic, how cruel! . . . It cannot be true; she was so kind to me!"

Kent raised her chin and looked steadily into her eyes.

"It is true enough dearest, but who can deny the hand of fate. Her love for Natera was great, and had she not died, her life would have been a living death following his execution. . . . Just think of her as being kind to you and that her judgment lies in the hands of a higher court. . . . You must think now of your freedom dear one and forget that her body lies on that bed. . . . You are now my prisoner and must obey me."

Juanita wanted to glance again at the bed, but she heeded his advice.

"Felipe dear, you seem so new to me—rather dictatorial, but I like it! . . . Will you keep me a prisoner very long?"

Kent smiled and caressed her hands with his lips.

"When the good padre says the word—forever! . . . Now, we are not out of the bag yet. Our freedom is confined temporarily to the top of this hill, at least until morning. . . . I just sent Herrera back to Seibo for help, while soon we shall be attacked by the remainder of Natera's band. It is only the matter of minutes before they will be here. . . . Do you think you can remain here in this room while I hold them off outside? Of course I shall take Natera with me."

Juanita protested.

"You are not going to fight them alone?"

"Yes, I could not expect Natera to help me."

"Then I shall remain by your side!" She clutched the lapels of his blouse pockets and the firmness of her chin accentuated her decision.

Kent gently lowered her chin.

"No, darling; as much as I appreciate your love, I cannot endanger you outside. You must remain here, or if you choose, in the other room across the hall. . . . Please do as I say, for time is flying and I must use the available last minutes in preparing some sort of barricade outside."

Juanita smiled over his firmness.

"All right Dictator, if ever I expect to obey you, I must learn now. . . . No, I shall remain here in this room. I do not mind Mercedes—poor soul, but if you are going to fight, please dear, be careful. . . . I know that you are experienced with such conditions, but pray do not be reckless. . . . May I watch you now and then from the outer doorway?"

Kent's face was serious.

"There is always danger from ricochet bullets and flying splinters. If those bandoleros shot true, I would grant you such a privilege, so dear, you must please me by remaining inside this room."

He held her close, and regardless of the presence of the bandit leader, kissed her tenderly and lingeringly on the lips. He then walked over to the open door.

"Come with me Natera!" he called.

The big man arose slowly, almost laboriously. He glanced tenderly at the sheet covered body on the bed and emitting a slight groan, followed Kent outside.

Deep pity was written on Juanita's face as he passed her.

CHAPTER XXIV

Outside the hut on the hill, the low silver moon shone down on a new scene. Philip Kent had availed himself of the opportunity to construct a crude barricade near the doorway. He had made several trips back and forth to the room inside, bringing out every box and keg he could find and piling them up. Two of the doors to the rooms he had taken from their rusted hinges and placed them face together in front of the pile, augmented by loose earth and rocks.

Juanita exchanged pleasantries with him as he worked, despite the suspense and grimness of the situation. The barricade when finished looked quite formidable, standing over three feet high, beginning from the wall of the hut and jutting out about eight feet.

Ramon Natera now with legs and arms securely tied, lay outstretched behind the secure side of the barricade where Kent had dragged him. He had offered no word but remained quietly resigned.

Glancing over the top of his little fort, Kent surveyed the prospective "no-man's-land" below it. The corral and bunkhouse at the foot of the hill stood out quite plainly, silhouetted in the pale light of the moon. Fantastic shadows showed in the valley, but he was too well schooled in nightly operations to permit his imagination to fool him. Nevertheless, he was sharply alert and anticipation was his lone disturbance.

The yellow light from the lamp burning inside shone out too fully from the window, and because it proved a decided menace to his work, a veritable spotlight, he paid a last visit into the room.

Juanita from her seat on the last remaining box watched him approach the bed, take the blanket folded at its foot and hang it over the window.

"A hint to the neighbors to mind their business, Felipe?" she said with a musical chuckle.

Kent laughed.

"More than that, Juanita dear—a hint to the lamp to confine its illumination to one place. The moon is spotlight enough without my being shown up as a ballet dancer. . . . Oh, by the way, you can help me after all."

Readily to his bidding, she followed him out of the room, across the hallway in the darkness, placing her hands on his shoulders for guidance, and they entered the other room. Moonlight from the rear window showed it to be entirely empty.

He drew her to the window.

"There is a possibility," he said, "that one of the bandoleros might have intelligence enough to approach the hut on this only other side, despite its almost impossible accessibility, with a view to surprising me when the battle is on. . . . See, the moon lights up the entire steep slope and it will be quite easy detecting anybody attempting it. . . . Will you stand here by the window and watch just for that?"

"Of course Felipe," she answered quickly. "I shall watch carefully. . . . If any bandoleros do use this side, which looks impossible, shall I come out front and warn you?"

"Yes, but do not expose yourself needlessly; just call to me from inside the doorway. . . . Now, I must hurry to my post—there will be action poco tiempo! He pressed her hand and turned to leave, but she held his hand firmly.

With understanding, he drew her lithe form to him and found her warm lips. How sweetly tender she was; the very innocence of her response enthralled him!

"Be careful, dearest one!" she called after him as he hurried into the hallway.

He took up his position behind the barricade, and had scarcely placed his belts of cartridges and extra pistol behind the back of the elongated Natera and removed his Stetson, when several figures stood out plainly in the moonlight at the foot of the hill. They had passed around one corner of the bunk-house, stopped a moment and then entered the house. Soon a faint light, possibly a candle showed through the open door.

Placing one of the loose boxes beneath him, Kent sat down (which brought his eyes on level with the top of the barricade) and waited patiently, taking advantage of the time to estimate a nearly exact pistol range distance to the bunk-house; approximately three hundred yards. Not only did the blanket over the window reduce his exposure from below, but visibility was decidedly better.

Perhaps ten minutes elapsed, when a tall figure emerged from the bunk-house and started to move up the hill.

"One of the bandits coming up to make his report!" thought Kent.

When the man arrived to within a hundred yards of the barricade, Kent thrust his pistol over the top.

"Stop where you are, hombre!" he called out sharply.

The man obeyed.

"Who the hell are you?" he shouted back. His accent was unlike a Dominican.

"Capitán Kent, del Policia!" answered Kent, readily crisp in his tone, but smiling over the other's audacity. He centered the front sight of his pistol on the chest of the dark figure. "I am holding Ramon Natera a prisoner in the name of Dominicana, and if you, or any of your brothers attempt to come up here—I will shoot to kill!"

A loud—"sacre!" came back to Kent from the motionless

figure. "For my part, Capitán, you may have that cochon Natera, for I was going to kill him anyway! . . . What I want, is my share of the money he has, and I am going to get it—*n'est-ce pas?*"

"*Cadeus Belgarde!*" muttered Kent. The Frenchman had returned like Miguel Herrera to avenge himself on the bandit leader and get some of the money hoarded by him! The arrival of this man on the scene made the situation more than critical, for there was no knowing the fortitude and ingenuity of such a devil!

Instinctively, his hand closed tightly around the stock of his pistol and he began that gradual squeezing from the wrist. But then he relaxed. No, it was too easy—cold blooded in fact and wholly unfair!

Belgarde's nasal voice sounded again, quite strained.

"Are you alone, Capitaine?" The question was asked in pure French, almost confidential.

Kent understood it, but he replied in Spanish.

"No, Belgarde—there are three of us!" It was a lie, a military subterfuge. "And I repeat—you cannot come up here. . . . War is declared between us and I have not forgotten that bump on the head you gave me either . . . *vamos pronto!* I shall allow you three minutes to get under cover!"

A raucous laugh greeted this.

"*Eh bien, mon Capitaine brave . . . c'est un guerre!* Zero hour let it be, and may the best man win! . . . *Mais oui!*—I apologize for the bump on your head!"

With another laugh, Belgarde turned about abruptly and strolled leisurely back toward the bunk-house, and if Kent was wrong in a guess, the Frenchman took an extremely long three minutes getting under cover.

Ramon Natera stirred at Kent's feet and twisted his head.

"Ah, Capitán—beware of that Belgarde! I know that laugh of his. It is the laugh of one craving for morphine, and with-

out it the Frenchman is a devil! . . . He shoots almost as good as you and it will not be long before he shows his cunning." Natera cleared his throat. "Please grant me a final request Capitán; it is not a hard one?"

Kent kept his eyes on the bunk-house.

"What is it, hombre?"

"God, knows I want to join my wife pronto, but if Belgarde outgenerals you and all is lost—please put a bullet in my head! That would be a kindly death compared to what the Frenchman would give me—yes, and perhaps you too!"

"What would he do?"

"Do? . . . Caramba! He is a Lugaru of Voodoo, a high priest, who cuts out the heart of a live victim and drinks its blood!" . . .

"Your loco, Natera! This Frenchman is a white man, highly cultured."

"Loco? . . . Ah, I know that white man only too well! . . . It has been but the past six months that he was well supplied with morphine. Now he has not a grain left, and Dios! He will cut out our hearts like he did to sacrificial victims in the mountains above Hinche! He is such a devil, to even forget the innocence of the girl inside because of his drug crazed mind!"

But further discussion of the practice of the black art of aboriginal Haiti ceased, for Kent ever alert, observed four of the bandits slipping out of the bunk-house below like spectres of the night.

Graciously the moon continued its steadfast exposure of the scene in the little valley. Would that he had the power of the ancient Joshua, to make the moon remain fixed in the heavens until he had won his battle!

There would come no attack from the rear, for a veritable wall of tangled jungle ran upward at an angle of eighty degrees to a low peak of the Cordilleras. Juanita was taking care

of the left side of the hill from her window, while the right side was a sheer wall of ragged cliff, higher than the continuation of the hill behind him. He decided that the dawn was about four hours away, judging from the length of his stay and the position of the moon, and with the arrival of the sun his worries would be over.

For a moment his thoughts carried back to Fort Ozama and Frank Linell, lying upon a hospital cot. How much must his life-long friend feel the disappointment of failing to be with him on this final adventure, climaxing the reign of Ramon Natera? He was no egotist, for he possessed sufficient common sense in realizing that Linell was much better off than he, and should Cadeus Belgarde prove the better strategist, his friend would be the only living American in the Dominican service to record "Semper Fidelis" to the name of Philip Kent.

Again the figures below disappeared into the bunk-house. It was only for a moment. They reappeared, dragging between them what seemed to be a big, broad board. Two were tugging on it, while two others were pulling. In comparison to the size of the men, the board was fully ten feet long and four feet wide. Had he overlooked it in his search of the bunk-house? But because they placed it on the ground, broadside to the barricade and it remained erect without holding, he decided that it was the bandit's mess table. Behind it the heads and shoulders of the four bandits were barely silhouetted from the high angle.

Without removing his eyes from the bandit's evident shield, he spoke to Ramon Natera.

"Is there a table down at the bunk-house, Natera?"

"Si, Capitán, and a big one too. . . . Ferdinando brought it in from the house of a rich mahogany man down in Hato Mayor."

"What! Brought that big table all the way up to Seibo?"

You must have been hard pressed for an eating table for your men!"

"Ah, this table is of solid mahogany with a top of six inches thick and studded all over with gold and silver coins. . . . Ferdinando hid it in the forest outside Hato Mayor and I sent an ox team after it. . . . Of course, I removed the coins, filled the chinks with lead and gave it to the men.

"That was the big raid before you kidnapped the Señor Canelon?"

"Yes, when you shot me in the arm and killed two of my men."

Kent made no further comment. As he watched, he was not certain, but the big table moved a few feet up the hill. Soon he was positive, for it was moving now steadily upward.

So, this was Belgarde's first move? . . . Not bad!

A third of the way up the hill, the table stopped moving and then the men behind it began shooting from both ends of the table. The spitting tongues of flame illuminated but instantly the rear of the table, yet the bullets never touched the barricade, cracking in the night air overhead and spattering against the wall of the hut.

Kent did not return the fire but waited patiently trying to count the shadows between pistol flashes. Came a volley, and at last he saw distinctly four crouching figures. Four? . . . There were five bandits, including Belgarde, for he had counted them on first appearance! This meant that the Frenchman was elsewhere! . . . But where?

There came a sudden lull in the shooting and laying down his pistol, he cupped his hands and turning his head to the doorway, called to Juanita.

Her voice answered him from the room inside.

"Yes, Felipe dear—are you hurt?"

"No, querida . . . their aim is high! . . . Are you watching carefully?"

"Yes, but I see nobody!"

"Very good; keep alert, for I expect somebody soon!"

Her reassurance came almost simultaneously with a continuance of the shooting. The flashes increased and the bullets rained on the hut and then began striking the barricade with dull thuds and "zings!"

This increase of fire meant that the bandits were taking more liberty in exposure, and as Kent swung his pistol to the left of the table, he awaited an opportunity. He knew that these sudden shoot and duck methods would increase in carelessness with heads lingering long enough to suit him. So with each flash and exposure of heads, he began swinging his pistol back and forth in unison. At last the hammer of his pistol fell.

Dropping instantly on hands and knees, he crawled to the far side of the barricade and peeped out from the lower edge. Between the explosions of pistols, a horrible shriek rent the air and one of the bandits gyrated into the open from behind the table and fell heavily to the ground. He rolled a few feet down the hill and then lay still. Kent crawled back to his seat, patting lovingly the cylinder of his pistol.

"'Called' that shot!" he muttered, "And that's another 'gook' gone to glory!"

The firing ceased with the first casualty, but the table moved upward again steadily. A fair hundred yards from the barricade it stopped and a period of deliberation followed.

Juanita Canelon suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Felipe,—Felipe! A man is coming up the other side of the hill!" Her voice was choked in fear.

It was at this moment that Kent remembered the hand-grenade resting in his trousers. Quickly he brought it forth, and pulling its pin, flung the heavy lead egg directly at the table. To his amazement, it struck a few feet in front of the table but failed to explode. He laughed outright, mirthlessly; fired three shots at random at the table, and bending low ran

in through the doorway. Juanita was waiting in the corridor.

"All right, darling," he whispered quickly. "Crouch down just inside the doorway, so that you are screened by the barricade and risk a peeping glance now and then outside. . . . If those bandoleros rush the barricade—scream as loudly as you can and run back into the room with me. . . . Be brave, my sweet little girl, for I shall die to save you!" He pressed her hand in brushing past and ran into the room she had quitted.

He approached one corner of the window, and pressing against the wall looked out.

The moon was already threatening to disappear behind the Cordilleras, but there was light enough to see a man moving slowly, laboriously up that steep side of the hill. Cacti, cajuillas bush, and rolling stones made his progress appear almost impossible. But at last he struggled to a cleared space, a tall figure perhaps fifty yards below. He was apparently sure that he was unobserved for he climbed erect. Suddenly he stopped short. A pistol gleamed in one hand as he raised his head in listening attitude.

In that poise, Kent recognized Cadeus Belgarde, and anticipating Juanita's scream, he brought his pistol down on the sill of the window and took careful aim, more careful than ever in his life. On this shot depended the successful defence of the hill. He suffered moral qualms however, and just before his pistol exploded, he called out loudly—

"Belgarde!"

And though the Frenchman flashed his pistol up, Kent's leaden missile found its mark. Falling to one knee, he tottered and then collapsed, a cajuillas bush preventing his body from rolling down the steep incline.

Immediately following the report of the pistol, came Juanita's scream, high pitched and terrifying.

CHAPTER XXV

With the last note of "reveille", an unwelcome bugle call to soldiers of every clime, Lieutenant Juan Ramirez, leading a mounted platoon of policia, trotted out of Seibo in column of twos. The platoon numbered some twenty-five picked men, carrying reserve rations and a plentiful supply of ammunition.

By the side of Ramirez, rode a very pompous Miguel Herrera, exultant within, that he a bandolero should one day become the guide to an inherent enemy—El Policia!

The morning sun was still hidden behind the lofty Cordilleras, yet its steadily expanding reflection, pink and white against a dull blue sky, revealed rigid ranks of khaki clad troops, drawn up at "attention" in front of the Café El Toro. They were the remainder of Colonel Mendoza's command awaiting roll-call.

There was every evidence of preparation for hasty departure. All excess equipment had been stored in trucks, waiting one behind the other near old Concepcion Church, and a hot breakfast was steaming out from two "soup-guns", mounted on truck trailers at the extreme end of the line. The men's tightly strapped packs lay on the ground correctly aligned behind the rear rank.

Lieutenant Ramirez halted his advance platoon outside the town and sent several men on ahead to act as marching points along the route; a necessary precaution against ambush. He divided the rest of his men and proceeded onward in road column formation; that is, flanks on the left and right side of the road respectively. The points were in constant signal communication with their commander, never losing sight of

each other. They would stop at turns in the road, trotting on when proper communication had been effected.

With arm signals to his points, Lieutenant Ramirez increased the gait of the column to an extended trot and soon Seibo was lost to sight far below in the valley.

Miguel Herrera was the only man out of formation, riding abreast of the lieutenant and answering questions which the latter shot at him with rapidity.

"Why are you sure the guards watching the Seibo road have fled?"

"Because Señor," replied Herrera, bobbing in his saddle, "when I saw Cadeus Belgarde with the other four tunnel guards coming down the trail toward camp, I hid and overheard him tell them that he was going to kill Ramon Natera. . . . I then decided to tell the other guards down on the Seibo road what I had heard, but changed my mind and told them a very big lie. . . . I said that the Frenchman had killed Natera and the Americano Kent, and had fled to Pedro Sanchez with the Canelon girl and Natera's bags of money. . . . And to impress them more, I said that the Americano marines had returned to Dominicana and would clean out Los Cordilleras of all bandoleros.

"They were like scared children, and when I added that I was running away to hide before the dreaded Americanos arrived in Seibo, they decided immediately to go with me. Several other bandoleros on the north trail joined us, and when I repeated my story to them, everybody agreed to make me their jefe. I was very popular among them and they felt I had the ability of my father, Gomez. Sensibly, I agreed to lead them, but ordered them to hide in La Candelaria, where I promised to join them later. . . . They asked of course, where I was going and I told them that Belgarde had left three horses behind him in camp and I was going back to get them. . . . They thought this a good idea, worthy of a new

leader, and begging me not to be caught by the policia, set off pronto toward La Candelaria."

Lieutenant Ramirez's sharp, black eyes never once left the bobbing back of the nearest point directly ahead while he listened to the little fellow.

"But surely they inquired what had become of the four bandoleros who went with the Frenchman?" he asked.

Herrera laughed.

"No, Señor. . . . They were too much concerned over their own welfare."

"Then it will prove an easy task to capture them by surrounding La Candelaria!"

Herrera tightened the reins to keep his horse from forging ahead.

"Yes, providing they are recognized!"

"Well, who will know them better than you, their newly elected leader?"

Herrera twisted in his saddle and looked squarely into the eyes of Ramirez.

"Si, Teniente; I could pick them out with ease, but before I do that, I must have the promise of the Commandante del Policia, that they will not be shot, for they always believed and trusted me."

Ramirez read sincerity in the eyes of Herrera and understood.

"You have already done much for Dominicana," he said, "and I can say that your request will undoubtedly be granted. . . . But now, about the Capitán Kent. . . . When you left him, was he well armed?"

"Si, Teniente. . . . He had three pistols and as many belts of cartridges."

"And you think he can hold the hill until we get there?"

Herrera grinned.

"Carajo! . . . If I could shoot like that Americano—I

would make short work of Belgarde and the other four! . . . Of course, the Frenchman is smart and can handle a pistol much better than any Dominicano I know."

"Well," said Ramirez, not favorably impressed, "we must lose no time in reaching El Capitán, for I know something of the Frenchman too."

Placing a whistle to his lips, he blew one shrill blast, and as the point directly ahead turned in his saddle and looked back, he signaled to him that he was increasing the gait of the column. At the canter, the column forged ahead.

It was very late in the morning when the leading points reached the fallen tree across the road near the mountain trail. Here they waited until the main column came up.

Lieutenant Ramirez criticised them severely for such breach in field maneuvers, but dismissed it from his mind.

Placing the points as a rear guard in the road at the entrance to the trail, he told Herrera to lead the way.

In single file the horses scrambled up the trail with Herrera leading the way and Ramirez directly behind him.

It was a tedious climb for the sun was on their backs and horses snorted in pain as the sheaves of an occasional Spanish bayonet cut into their flanks.

The clearing was reached high above and Ramirez ordered the men to dismount.

Herrera waved them back away from the big boulder standing in the middle of the clearing. He then disappeared behind it, reaching down for the rod that raised the tunnel's entrance door.

To the astonishment of Ramirez's entire command a moment later, the square door of earth and grass raised itself before their eyes, disclosing the great, yawning black entrance to the tunnel.

Herrera leaped into it, disappeared, and then scrambled out bearing two torches, blackened by much use. He borrowed

some matches from the lieutenant and fired the torches.

"We are ready now, Teniente," he said, holding out one of the torches. "I shall lead the way with one torch, and you may give this other one to one of your men to carry midway in the line as we pass through. . . . Tell them to be very careful and watch their footing, as we pass along a narrow, slippery ledge, where one slip means death. . . . Was I not right about the guards running away—pretty easy, huh?"

Ramirez nodded, accepted the torch and passed it over to the tall sergeant standing at his elbow.

"Yes, amigo chica; as yet we have not fired a shot. . . . Now let us hope we arrive in time to save the Capitán Kent—lead on!"

And how all the men and horses eventually passed through such a dangerous passageway without mishap, was a bewildering surprise to Lieutenant Ramirez. The men too seemed to sense their good fortune, for when they emerged on the plateau on the opposite side and stood at "rest", they exchanged comments with each other.

Without permitting the horses and men much rest, he formed them in a column of twos along the trail leading down into the valley below, and turned to Herrera.

"What is the distance now to the camp of Ramon Natera?"

"About three kilometers, Teniente," replied Herrera readily.

"Buenos! Lead on and do not spare your horse!"

Herrera dug in his heels and sped down the trail.

Ramirez turned in his saddle and called back to the column, "At the charge—follow me!"

With Hererra not far in the lead, the column of men pursued him as it were. Such a breakneck chase over such a rough trail, was equal to the fastest and hardest steeple chase; ceiba saplings, twisted underbrush, and bushes serving in place of barriers.

A few natives showed scared faces from the doorways of

their huts along the hilly slopes, but with horses flecking foam and breathing hard, the death inviting gait was hardly diminished until the corral and bunk-house of the camp came into view at the last turn in the trail.

Herrera had outdistanced them, and regardless of the danger that might be awaiting him on the hill, was waiting for them, dismounted at the corral.

Lieutenant Ramirez assembled his men, gave the order to dismount and the horses were let loose into the corral without removal of saddle equipment. He stood to one side and studied the hill.

"It looks bad, Teniente," said Herrera, pointing to the deserted looking hut on top of the hill.

Ramirez answered him not, but his face was grim and his eyes showed fire.

He stepped out in front of his men, who were waiting in double rank, rifles at "order arms", in charge of the sergeant in the lee of the bunk-house. Came his first order.

"Platoon right!"

The platoon swung to the right on a pivot, bringing its front to the face of the hill.

He drew his pistol.

"Port arms! At the 'ready'!"

The men's rifles snapped with precision into position across their chests, and thumbs twisted safety locks to the "ready".

Ramirez pointed his pistol up the hill.

"That hut and barricade is our objective! . . . 'As skirmishes'—follow me!"

The platoon broke its double rank, extending to left and right of their commander in a single front with intervals of four feet between each man.

Ramirez, with Herrera at his heels, ran up the hill.

They passed one bandit lying with face upturned to the sun, rigid in death, a bullet hole in his chest.

The young officer smiled grimly at the sight. He had anticipated a volley of rifle fire from the barricade close to the hut, and he was ready to order his men to lie down. Yet onward and upward they went, and the hut looked more deserted than ever without the least sign of a living defender. A deathlike silence prevailed.

Reaching the top, Ramirez ordered his men to lie down a few feet in front of the barricade, and accompanied by Herrera, with dagger in hand, the courageous officer climbed over the barricade and the bullet splintered table in front of it.

With a shout of joy, he pointed to three bandits sprawled in death on the ground near the doorway of the hut.

"You have come too late, Teniente!" called out a voice under the barricade, muffled and hoarse.

Ramirez swung his pistol down to the voice as he turned around.

Ramon Natera looked up at him from under boxes and kegs piled on top of him.

"Who is that, Herrera?" inquired the lieutenant.

Herrera glanced quickly at Natera and laughed.

"Why, caramba! That is Ramon Natera, El Jefe!"

Astonishment upon his face, Ramirez rushed in through the doorway.

"Surrender, bandoleros, in the name of the Republica!" he shouted, bursting into the room on his right.

A woman's voice answered him from within.

"Come in, there is nobody here to harm you!"

Herrera was at the lieutenant's back when he entered the room.

They stood aghast at the sight before their eyes.

Upon the floor beneath the window, sat Juanita Canelon, her beautiful face entirely bereft of color and her great mass of black curls hanging loosely down over her shoulders. In her lap, supported by her arms, lay the figure of Philip Kent. He

appeared unconscious. A jug of water stood close by and it was stained red. Kent's shirt had been torn open and pieces of the shirt made into bandages were wrapped tightly around his bared chest just below the right shoulder. A great blood spot showed through the bandage. Juanita had been applying a wet compress to the wound.

Near the door, and lying face downward was another man. Herrera went over and turned the body on its back.

A black whiskered face stared up at him with glassy eyes. Blood still oozed from two wounds over the man's heart, and another wound showed on his right shoulder.

"Cadeus Belgarde!" shouted Herrera in astonishment, turning to Lieutenant Ramirez, who was bending down to Juanita Canelon.

Ramirez heeded him not.

"Are you all right, Señorita?"

"Yes, Teniente," she replied softly, "but Felipe—Madre Dios! The Capitán Kent is badly wounded!"

Ramirez, with some effort, gathered Kent in his arms and bore him across the room to the bed.

He was surprised when he saw the sheet covered body already lying there.

"Herrera—come here!" he called over his shoulder. "Who is this here?"

"That is Natera's woman," said Herrera approaching the bed. "She is dead!"

Ramirez held Kent stoutly.

"Well, move her way over pronto to the other side of the bed!"

Herrera recoiled, but noting the lieutenant's stern aspect, he bent over and gingerly rolled the dead woman over and over until she lay against the wall.

"Now, turn that pillow over!"

The order was obeyed, and Ramirez laid Kent gently down.

"Run quickly to the men, get two first aid kits from them, and tell them to return to the corral, taking Ramon Natera with them and wait there for me.

Herrera gladly ran out of the room, and Ramirez returned to Juanita Canelon and helped her to rise.

"What has happened, Señorita?"

Juanita did not reply, but rushed to the bed and fell upon her knees by Kent's side.

"Come, Teniente," she called back to him. "Tell me, please, if he will live?"

Ramirez joined her and proceeded to examine Kent's wound. He noticed that although the Americano's eyes were tightly closed his respiration was quite normal. With the ability of one not entirely unfamiliar with the primary methods of a surgeon, he discovered that the bullet entering the right breast had passed out, under and far to the right of the shoulder blade, and there was no blood on his lips to indicate that a lung had been punctured. The wound had practically ceased to flow, was not inflamed, and the derma on either side was ruptured but slightly. His pulse was not alarmingly weak, although his face was drawn and white, with positive indications of approaching fever.

"It is a serious wound for the present, Señorita," he told her candidly. "But aside from a possible fever, his condition is not critical. . . . Knowing the excellent health of El Capitán, he will recover rapidly in the hands of our master surgeon at Fort Ozama. . . . He has lost considerable blood, but calm yourself, he is safely removed from the hands of death."

Juanita's relief was great and color was now returning to her cheeks.

"Ah, kind friend, I thought he would never stop bleeding, but oh, my brave Felipe, how he fought!"

Miguel Herrera now entered the room and approached, bearing the first aid packets and a canteen of water.

Ramirez took the packets, tore the tin coverings off them and placed the snow-white, neatly folded bandages upon the bed. He then removed Juanita's makeshift bandages, rebathed the wound with water from the canteen, and then rebandaged the wound securely with the sterile gauze.

Next, he bathed Kent's face, neck, and hands and poured some of the water down his mouth.

Kent's eyelids quivered, and the water trickling down his throat made him cough. His eyes did not open, but his respiration was fully normal now.

Soaking another torn piece of Kent's shirt, Ramirez folded it and placed it on Kent's forehead.

"Return to the corral, Herrera," he said, "and tell the men to make two stretchers and bring them up here. . . . Then, please return to the Seibo road and wait for the arrival of Coronel Mendoza and the rest of the batallion. . . . Present him my respects and say that it will not be necessary to send any more men; that Ramon Natera has been captured and I shall be returning soon with the Capitán Kent and the Señorita Canelon."

"And, El Capitán," replied Herrera, concern in his voice. "Is he seriously hurt?"

"Yes, little hombre, but he will live to thank you for your aid. . . . Now hurry the men along with the stretchers."

With an "adios", and a smile of satisfaction, Herrera was gone.

When Ramirez turned to Juanita again, she was in the act of stroking Kent's head.

"Will you tell me now, just what took place, Señorita?" he asked.

Juanita smiled a tired yet brave smile.

"Yes, amigo fino, but it was terrible."

Still on her knees by Kent's side, she held one hand to his cheek as she talked.

"After Herrera left us to go for aid, Felipe . . . Capitán Kent, made that barricade which you saw, and waited the attack of several bandoleros who put in appearance. . . . It came, and while El Capitán was busy defending the hill, I was stationed in the other room to watch from the window in case any of the bandoleros should surprise him from that side.

"Well, one of them, that man lying over there—" She pointed to Cadeus Belgarde lying behind the door where Herrera had dragged him. "He tried to sneak up my side of the hill and take us by surprise. . . . I saw him at once and warned El Capitán, who quit the barricade, and placing me in the doorway to watch the others, ran to the window where I had been watching. I was instructed to scream should the barricade be rushed. . . . Well, El Capitán shot the lone bandolero, but while he was so engaged, I saw three bandoleros rush out from behind that big table and make for the barricade. . . . As they clambered over it, I screamed and El Capitán reached my side just as they moved on toward the doorway.

"They saw us and fired their pistols, but not before El Capitán swept me behind him. . . . Their shots flew wide, splintering the top of the doorway, and quickly—oh, so quickly, Felipe began firing his two pistols at them! . . . Standing there in front of me as solid as a rock and his smoking pistols even more steady, he was wonderful—cierto, so brave!

"When the smoke cleared, the three bandoleros lay stilled in death on the ground. . . . I felt quite dizzy and Felipe all but carried me into the other room for water.

"Suddenly, that man whom we thought dead on the other side of the hill, lurched heavily into the room, blood streaming from his shoulder. . . . Felipe's back was to him, so I screamed—but too late! . . . But wounded as he was, the strange looking man raised his pistol and with a devilish grin,

shot Felipe in the back! . . . Why, I did not faint from the shock, I do not know, but I became as in a daze.

"Santa Maria! My brave Felipe fell to one knee, blood soaking through his shirt, but turning swiftly, he fired his own pistol, not once—but twice at the other man! . . . He then sank to the floor, calling faintly my name.

"His aim was true, for the other man fell heavily to the floor also. . . . I ran to Felipe, crying like a babe, and did all I could for the bravest man in all the world!

"To make matters worse, the oil lamp went out, and I was torn with fear and foreboding until daylight came. . . . It seemed an eternity until you arrived."

Lieutenant Ramirez listened in spell-bound wonder. There was a tearful mist in his eyes.

"Señorita," he said with great emotion, "Most surely El Capitán is the bravest man in the world, and too, you are the bravest woman! . . . How could you muster such courage in the face of such danger and horror?"

Tears welled into Juanita's big eyes.

"Ah, amigo, if you saw how brave and strong was El Capitán, you would stand by his side even through fires of hell! . . . Never once did he think of his own safety. His constant concern was over me. . . . Why, before he shot that man behind the door, he warned him from the window—fair play!"

She turned to Kent and kissed his cheek.

"And, Teniente," she added softly, failing to look up, "do you know, while he was unconscious in my arms, he continued to bolster my courage by muttering several times—'Juanita! Juanita! Be brave—I am near you!'"

Ramirez gazed with great admiration on Philip Kent and the woman kneeling by his side. To him this open manifestation of love for the Americano, was a beautiful gesture.

"Yes, Señorita," he said firmly. "His courage will ever be a watchword for the Policia Nacional. . . . With the advance

of the Second Regiment through Pedro Sanchez, and the rounding up of the other fugitive bandoleros, the thorn in the side of Dominicana will be removed. . . . I hesitate to think how great will be the reward of the Capitán Kent."

Philip Kent had opened his eyes.

"I am deserving of no reward, Ramirez amigo," he said weakly. "All I ask is to have this brave girl by my side—forever!"

Ramirez's eyes widened in surprise.

"Capitán! . . . You can talk?"

"Felipe!" cried Juanita joyfully. "Tell me, dear one—will you live?"

"Live!" echoed Kent, smiling bravely. "Of course I shall live!" And then his lips were silenced by the lips of Juanita.

Lieutenant Ramirez, sensing but one little world for just two people, slipped quietly out of the room to await the arrival of the stretchers.

* * * *

On the day that Miguel Herrera stood in the compound at Fort Ozama and witnessed the execution of Ramon Natera, the Clyde steamer HURON, weighed anchor and steamed slowly out of the harbor of Santo Domingo City. As she shifted her course to the southeast, exposing her port side to the glaring afternoon sun, Lieutenant Juan Ramirez, standing by the side of Señor Reynaldo Canelon, in the watch tower of the fort, focussed his field glasses on three figures huddled in steamer chairs in the lee of the cabins.

"Tell me, Teniente," inquired Señor Canelon, rubbing his hands together with nervous motions, "can you see them?"

Ramirez's white teeth gleamed in a broad smile.

"Yes; Kent, Linell, and your daughter."

“Is Juanita smiling?”

“Smiling? . . . Why, her face is radiant and she is holding her husband's hand!”

THE END.

Do not judge too harshly Mercedes Baptista, the beautiful "mistress" of the cruel Natera, but you might ask—who murdered the Spanish consul and who is the father of pretty Rosa Ascuncion's baby?

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*Mr. Flewelling is a Bostonian with a long service in the United States Marines.