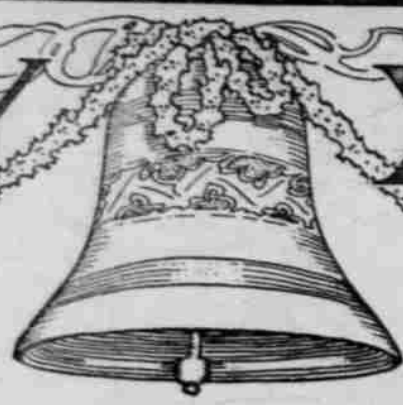


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CHAPTER X.

WHEREIN CERTAIN PEOPLE MEET UNEXPECTEDLY.

IRIS came back from the void to find herself lying on a truckle bed in a dimly lighted hotel. She gazed up with uncomprehending eyes at two brown skinned women bending over her.

One, the elder, was chafing her hands. The other, a tall, graceful girl, was stirring something in an earthenware vessel.

"Where am I? How did I come here?" Iris asked.

Then she remembered, and memory brought a feeling of helplessness not wholly devoid of self reproach. It was bad enough that her presence should add so greatly to the dangers besetting her friends. It was far worse that she should have fainted at the very moment when such weakness might prove fatal to them.

Why did she faint? Ah! A lively blush chased the pallor from her cheeks, and a few strenuous heart beats restored animation to her limbs. Of course in thinking that she had yielded solely to the stress of surcharged emotions Iris was mistaken. What she really needed was food. A young woman of perfect physique and dowered with the best of health does not collapse into unconsciousness because a young man embraces her and each at the same moment makes the blissful discovery that the wide world contains no other individual of supreme importance. She hardly realized how hungry she was until the girl handed her the bowl, which contained a couple of eggs beaten up in milk, while small quantities of rum and sugar cane juice made the compound palatable.

While the girl Manoela was furtively appraising the clothing worn by Iris her mother was listening ever for hasty footsteps among the trailing vines.

At last, with a muttered prayer, she went to the door and unfastened the stout wooden staple that prevented intruders from entering unbidden. Some one approached.

"Is that you, Manoel?" asked Luisa Gomez in a hushed voice.

There was no answer. The woman drew back. She would have closed the door, but a slim, active figure sprang across the threshold. She shrieked in terror. The newcomer was a Brazilian officer.

"I think you are here, mademoiselle," he said in French. "I am come to share your retreat for a little while. Ferchance by daybreak I may arrive at some plan. At present you and I are in difficulties, is it not?"

Iris recognized the voluble, jerky speech. A wild foreboding gripped her heart until she was like to shudder under its fierce anguish.

"You, Captain San Benavides?" she asked, and her utterance was unnaturally calm.

"I, mademoiselle," he said, "and, alas, I am alone. May I come in? It is not well to show a light at this hour, seeing that the island is overrun with infuriated soldiers."

The concluding sentence was addressed to Luisa Gomez in Portuguese. Realizing instinctively that the man came as a friend, she stood aside, trembling, on the verge of tears. He entered, and the door was closed behind him.

"I am the only man who escaped, mademoiselle. The others? Well, it is war, and war is a lottery."

"Do you mean that they have been killed, all killed?" she murmured, with a pitiful sob.

"I—I think so."

"You think? Do you not know?"

He sighed. His hand sought an empty cigarette case. Such was the correct military air, he fancied—to treat misfortunes rather as jests. He frowned because the case was empty, but smiled at Iris.

"It is so hard, mademoiselle, when one speaks these things in a strange tongue. Permit me to explain that which has arrived. We encountered a packet and surprised it. Having secured some weapons and accoutrements, we hastened to the quay, where was moored the little steamship. Unhappily she was crowded with soldiers. They fired, and there was a short fight. I was knocked down, and what do you call it—stunned—while one might count ten. I rose, half blinded, and what do I see? The vessel leaving the quay full of men engaged in combat, while just beyond the point a warship is signalling her arrival. It was a Brazilian warship, mademoiselle. She showed two red rockets, followed by a white one. It was only a matter of minutes before she met the little steamship. I tell you that it was bad luck, that—a vile blow. I was angry, yes, I stamp my foot and say foolish things. Then I run."

Iris made no reply. She hid her face in her hands. She could frame no more questions. San Benavides was trying to tell her that Hozier and the rest had been overwhelmed by fate at the very instant escape seemed to be within reach. The Brazilian, probably because of difficulties that beset him in using a foreign language, did not make it clear that he had flung himself flat in the dust when he heard the order to fire given by some one on board the launch.

Then the lightning of a woman's intuition pierced the abyss of despair. Surely there were curious blanks in this thrilling narrative. As was her way when thoroughly aroused, Iris stood up and seized San Benavides almost roughly by the arm. Her distraught eyes searched his face with a pathetic earnestness.

"Why do you think that the launch did not get away?" she cried. "It was dark. The moon might have been in shadow. If the launch met the warship and was seen there must have been firing."

"Chere mademoiselle, there was much firing," he protested. "At sea?"

The words came dully. She was stricken again even more shrewdly. The gloom was closing in on her, yet she forced herself to drag the truth from his unwilling lips.

"Yes. Of course I could not wait there in that open place. I was compelled to seek shelter. Troops were running from town and citadel. I avoided them by a miracle. And my sole concern then was your safety."

"Oh, my safety?" she wailed brokenly. "How does it avail me that my friends should be slain? Why was I not with them? I would rather have died as they died than live in the knowledge that I was the cause of their death."

San Benavides essayed a confidential hand on her shoulder. She shrank from him. He purred amiably: "Mademoiselle is profoundly unhappy. Under such circumstances one says things that are unmerited, is it not? If any one is to blame it is my wretched country, which cannot settle its political affairs without bloodshed. Ah, mademoiselle, I weep with you and tender you my most respectful homage."

A deluge of tropical rain beat on the hut with a sudden fury. Conversation at once became difficult, nearly impossible. Iris threw herself back on the trestle in a passion of grief that rivaled the outer tempest.

The girl, Manoela, weeping out of sympathy, crept to Iris' side and gently stroked her hair. Like her mother, she could only guess that the English lady's friends were captured, perhaps dead. Even her limited experience of life's vicissitudes had taught her what short shrift was given to those who defied authority. The republic of Brazil does not permit its criminals to be executed, but it shows no mercy to rebels. Manoela, of course, believed that the Englishmen were helping the imprisoned Dom Corria to regain power. She remembered how a mutiny was once crushed on the island, and her eyes streamed.

Meganwhile Luisa Gomez was touched by the good looking soldier's plight. "We must try to help you, Senhor Capitano," she said. "If the others are dead or taken you may not be missed."

He threw out his hands in an eloquent gesture. Life or death was a matter of complete indifference to him, it implied.

"We shall know in the morning," he said. "Have you any cigarettes?"

"But listen, senhor. Why not take off your uniform and dress in my clothes? You can cut off your mustaches and wear a mantilla over your face, and we will keep you here until there is a chance of reaching a ship. Certainly that is better than being shot."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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