

Stowaway

By LOUIS TRACY

Author of the "Pillar of Light," "The Wings of the Morning" and "The Captain of the Kansas."

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CHAPTER XVI

SHOWING HOW BRAZIL CHOSE HER PRESIDENT.

TWO thousand five hundred years ago the prophet Jeremiah expressed incredulity as to the power of an Ethiopian to change his skin or a leopard his spots. The march of the centuries has fully justified the seer's historic doubt, so it makes but slight demand on the critical faculties to assume that two years' residence in Europe had not cooled the hot southern blood flowing in Carmela's veins.

She had hated Iris before she set eyes on her. She hated her now that she had seen her rare beauty. She gloated on the suffering inflicted by the presence of the faded old man who claimed her as his bride. Though it was of the utmost importance that she should hasten to her father, she returned to Las Flores in her rival's company, their arms linked in seeming friendship and the Brazilian girl's ears alert to treasure every word that told of Bulmer's wooing.

So Dickey contented himself by listening to Coke's Homeric account of the Andromeda's wrecking, and if he interposed an occasional question and thus drew the girl's sweet voice into the talk it was invariably germane to the strange history of the ship and her human freight.

Coke's narrative was picturesque and lurid. Every incident centered in the striking personality of Philip Hoxier. From the instant the second shell struck the winch and laid him apparently dead on the forecastle to the very hour of this coming together at Las Flores, Hoxier held the stage. It was he who took Iris on his shoulders and brought her to safety through the spume of the wrathful sea, he who carried her to the wharf, he who crossed Fernando Noronha alone to protect her.

Coke was impartial. He would have minimized his own singular bravery in running up the ship's signals had not Iris given him a breathing space while she enthralled the others with her description. Otherwise Coke skipped no line of his epic.

"You'll recollect," he wheezed in a voice that rasped like a file, "you'll recollect, Mr. Verity, as I said to you that Hoxier was good enough to take charge of the bridge of a battleship. By—well, anyhow if I'd said the channel fleet I shouldn't have bin talkin' through me 'at. Look at 'im now 'E's the only reel live man Dom Vot's 'is-name 'as got. Sink me, if it wasn't for the folks at 'ome an' the fact that the Andromeda's skipper ought to keep clear of politics in this crimson country I'd 'ave a cut in at the game myself."

It might be hoped that Carmela's mood would soften when she discovered her rival's hapless love, but that would be expecting something which her bursting southern heart could not give. A volcano pours forth lava, not water. It scorches, not heals. Iris, willing or not, had sapped her Salvador's allegiance. Carmela wanted to see those curved lips writhing in pain, those brown eyes dimmed, that smooth brow wrung with the grief that knows no remedy.

A fierce joy leaped up in her when Verity spoke of an early departure.

"You see, Iris," he explained, "these Brazilian bucks may be mouths in settlin' their differences. Dickey an' me 'elped a lot by our consul, squeezed a pass out of the president—beg pardon, miss, but 'e is president, in Pernambuco at all events," he said in an apologetic aside to Carmela—"an' the



sooner we make tracks for ole England the better it'll be for all of us. Wot do you say to an early start tomorrow? We'd be off tonight on'y I'm feared my rheumaticky bones wouldn't stand the racket."

The color ebbed from Iris's face, but she said at once:

"I shall be ready, uncle, dear. I promised Dom Corria to look after the hospital appliances that are so much needed by the poor soldiers, but the Senhora de Sylva will attend to that much more effectually than I."

"Good! Then that's settled."

Carmela, of course, did not believe in a woman's complacency in such a vital matter. She was ever prepared to spring, to strike, to wrench their plans to suit her own ends; but, contrive as she might, she could not succeed in leaving Iris alone with Bulmer. Full of device, she was foiled at each turn. The day wore, the sun went down, the starlit sky made beautiful a parched earth, but never a word in privacy did Iris exchange with her husband to be. Carmela's malice was not hidden from her, but she despised it. There was some ease for her tortured brain in defeating it. If the Senhora de Sylva had only understood how thoroughly the Englishwoman loathed her petty jealousy it was possible that the few remaining hours of their enforced intimacy might have been rendered less irksome.

The future is the most cunning of playwrights. No man may tell what the next scene shall be. And no man nor any woman could guess the mad revel of hate and war that would rage that night around the placid homestead of Las Flores.

Behind the veranda was a huge ball-room converted by the exigencies of the campaign into a dining hall for the many inmates of the finca. The Brazilian ladies, the sailors, some sick or wounded officers who were not confined to bed, even the household servants, took their meals there in common. Supper was served soon after 9 o'clock. When cigars and cigarettes were lighted and the company broke up into laughing, gossiping, noisy groups, the place looked more like a popular continental cafe than a room in a private mansion.

Though De Sylva, General Russo, San Benavides and some score of members of the president's staff who usually dined at the finca were now absent, there was no lack of lively chatter. A very Babel of tongues mixed in amity. The prevalent note was one of cheery animation. Carmela exerted herself to win popularity, and a president's daughter need not put forth very strenuous efforts in that direction to be acclaimed by most.

Iris was listening with real interest to Verity's description of the finding of Macfarlane in the Andromeda's boat by a Cardiff bound collier three days after he had drifted away from Fernando Noronha.

"The yarn kem to us through the consul at Pernambuco," he said. "Evidently, from wot you tell me, it's all right. Poor ole Mac 'ad a bad time afore 'e was picked up, but 'e was alive, an' I'm jolly glad of it, for 'e'll be a first rate witness w'en this business comes up in court."

"Wot court?" demanded Coke sharply.

"The court that settles our claim, of course," retorted Verity, with a quick ferret look at his fellow conspirator.

"There'll be no claim. The president means to stomp up in style. You take my tip an' shut up about courts," said Coke.

"It'll cost Brazil a tidy penny," remarked Bulmer thoughtfully.

A criado, a nondescript manservant attached to the household, stooped over Iris and whispered something. She gathered that she was wanted in the patee, or courtyard, which, owing to the construction of the house, stood on one side instead of in front, where the lawn usurped its usual position.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Colonel San Benavides, senhora."

"Tell him to wait," she said, hoping to gain a moment wherein to decide how best to act.

"It is urgent, senhora—ao mesmo tempo, the colonel said."

"Go! That is my answer."

Iris had no wish to meet San Benavides. If she were seen with him in the dark patee at this late hour fuel would be added to the fire of Carmela's foolish spite. She was aware of Carmela's covert glance watching her from the other end of the long room. What was to be done? Why not send Carmela to her stead? They were almost of the same height and dressed somewhat alike in flowered muslin. It would be an amusing mistake, though annoying perhaps to San Benavides. At any rate, Carmela would not object, and Iris was fully resolved not to keep the trust in person.

She walked straight to her enemy. "Colonel San Benavides awaits you in the patee," she said in English. "Awaits me!"

There was no mistaking the gleam in those jet black eyes. The smoldering fire flamed into furnace heat at the implied indignity of such a mandate being delivered by Iris.

"I suppose so," said Iris carelessly. "A servant brought the message. He came to me in the first instance, but I am just going to my room to pack my few belongings. We leave here at daybreak, you know."

So at last Carmela would learn the truth. Salvador was out there alone. She would soon judge him. If he were innocent she would know. If he had merely been made the sport of a designing woman she was ready to forgive. In a more amiable mood than she had displayed at any moment since her arrival at Las Flores, Carmela hastened along a dark corridor, crossed a bare hall, passed through a porch and searched the shadows of the patee for the form of her one time lover.

A voice whispered in French:

"Come quickly, senhora, I pray you!"

It startled her to find San Benavides talking French until it occurred to her that Iris and he must converse in that language or hardly at all. The thought was disquieting. The volcano stirred again.

"Senhora, je vous prie!" again pleaded the man, who was on horseback under the trees.

She did not hesitate, but ran to him. Without a word of explanation he caught her in his arms, drew her up until she was seated on the holsters strapped to a gaucho's saddle and wheeled his horse into a gallop. Filled with a grim determination, she uttered no protest. Not a syllable crossed her lips lest he should strive to amend his woeful blunder. She noticed that they were not going toward the camp, but circling round the inclosed land in the direction of the hills. Though the night was dark, the stars gave light enough for the horse to move freely. Carmela's head was bent.

But San Benavides wondered why the cold Inglesa had surrendered so silently. He expected at least a scream, a struggle, an impassioned demand to be released.

"One word, senhora," he muttered. "You must think me mad. I am not. All is lost. Our army is defeated. In an hour Las Flores will be in flames."

The girl quivered in his arms. A moaning cry came from her.

"It is true, I swear it!" he vowed. "I mean you no ill. I fought till the end, and my good horse alone carried me in advance of the routed troops. Dom Corria may reach the finca alive, but even so he and the rest will be killed. I refused to escape without you. Believe me or not, you are dearer than life itself."

Carmela, with a sudden movement, raised her face to his and threw aside her veil.

"Salvador!" she said.

His eyes glared into hers. His frenzied clutch at the reins pulled the horse on to his haunches.

"My God, Carmela!" he almost shrieked.

"Yes. So you are running away, Salvador—running away with the English miss, deserting my father in the hour of his need! But she will die with the others, you say. Well, then, join her!"

During that quick twist on the horse's withers she had plucked a revolver from a holster. She meant to shatter that false face of his utterly, to blast him as with lightning, but the lock snapped harmlessly, for San Benavides had indeed borne himself gallantly in the fray. He struck at her now in a whirl of fury. She winced, but with catamount activity drew back



"I HAVE KILLED HIM."

her arm and hit him on the temple with the heavy weapon. He collapsed limply, reeled from off the saddle, and they fell together. The frightened horse, finding himself at liberty, galloped to the camp, where already there was an unusual commotion.

Carmela flung herself on the man's body. She was capable of extremes either of grief or passion.

"Salvador, my love, my love!" she screamed. "What have I done? Speak to me, Salvador! It is I, Carmela! Oh, Mary Mother, come to my aid! I have killed him—killed my Salvador!"

He looked very white and peaceful as he lay there in the gloom. She could not see whether his lips moved. She was too distraught to note if his heart was beating. It seemed incredible that she, a weak woman, should have crushed the life out of that little and active frame with one blow. She rose and ran blithely

Long before Carmela reached the finca San Benavides stirred, groined, squirmed convulsively and raised himself on hands and knees. He turned and sat down, feeling his head.

"The spitfire!" he muttered. "The she devil! And that other! Would that I could wring her neck!"

A sputtering of rifles crackled in the valley. There was a blurred clamor of voices. He looked at the sky, at the black summits of the hills. He stood up, and his inseparable sword clanked on the stony ground.

"Ah, well," he growled, "I have done with women. They have had the best of my life. What is left I give to Brazil."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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