ELISSA.

The Doom of Zimbabwe.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

(Copyright, 1898, by H. Rider Haggard).

CHAPTER XII.—CONTINUED.

Having passed the gate, Aziel and Issachar crept down the winding passages of stone, groping their path by such light as fell from the narrow line of sky above them, till at length they reached the court of the sanctuary. Here the place was as silent as death, for the noise from the city without could not pierce the towering walls of massive granite.

"It is the very pit of Topbet," murmured Issachar, peering through the dense shadows, "the house of Beelzebub, where his presence dwells. Whither now, Aziel?"

The Prince pointed to two objects that were visible in the starlight, and answered:

"Thither, at the foot of the pillar of El."

"Ah, I remember," said Issachar, "where the accursed woman would have offered sacrifice, and the priests cut me down because I prophesied to them of the wrath to come, that is now at hand. An ill-omened spot, indeed, and an ill-omened tryst with the fiends for witnesses. Well, lead on, and I pray you be as brief as may be, for this place weighs down my soul, and I feel danger in it—danger to the body and the spirit."

So they went forward. "Be careful," whispered Aziel presently. "The pit of sacrifice is at your feet."

"Yes, yes," he answered, "we walk upon the edge of the pit, and in truth, I grow fearful, for at the threshold of such buildings the angel of the Lord deserts us."

"There are none here to fear," said Aziel, but even as he spoke, though he could not see it, a white face rose above the edge of the pit, like that of some ghost struggling from the tomb, watched them a moment with cold eyes, then disappeared again.

Now they were near the greater pillar, and now from its shadows glided a black-veiled shape.

"Elissa," murmured Aziel.

"It is I," whispered a soft voice, "but who comes with you?"

"I, Issachar," said the Levite, "who would not suffer that he of whom I am given charge should seek such company alone. Now, priestess, say your say with the Prince yonder and let us be gone swiftly from this blood-stained place."

"You speak harsh words to me, Issachar," she said gently, "yet I am most glad you have come, for, believe me, I sought no lovers' meeting with Prince Aziel. Listen, both of you. You know that they have consecrated me high-priestess of Baaltis against my will, but I tell you what I have already told Prince Aziel, that I am no longer a worshipper of Baaltis. Yes, here in her very temple I renounce her, even though she take my life in vengeance. O! since they made me priestess I have been forced to learn all her worship, and to see sights that would chill the blood to hear them, and I tell you, Prince Aziel and Issachar, that I will bear no more of it. From El and Baaltis I turn to him you worship, though, alas, little time is left to me in which to plead with him."

"Why is little time left?" broke in Aziel.

"Because my death is very near me, Prince, for if I live, see what a fate is mine, either to become high priestess of Baaltis and be slain by day to bow the knee and month by month to make sacrifice—of what, think you? Well, of the blood of maids and children, or, perhaps, should their fears overcome their scruples, to be given by the Council as a peace offering to Ithobal. Well, I will bear neither of these burdens of blood or shame. They are too heavy for me, but as soon as you are gone I, too, shall leave this city, not in the body, but in the spirit, searching for peace or sleep. It was for this reason that I sought to speak with you in farewell, for in my weakness I desired that you should know the truth of the cause and manner of my end. And since, since for me there is no escape, farewell forever, Prince Aziel, whom I have loved, and whom I can scarce hope to meet again, even beyond the grave," and with a despairing motion of her hand she turned to go.

"Stay," said Aziel hoarsely, "for we cannot be parted thus; since by your own act you can dare to leave the world, will you not dare fly with me?"

"Perchance, Prince," she answered with a little laugh. "But would you dare to take me, and, if so, would Issachar here suffer it? No, no; go your own path in life and leave me death—it is the easier way."

"In this matter I am master and not Issachar," said Aziel, "though it is true that, should it please him, he can warn the priests of El. Listen, Elissa: Either you leave this city with me or I stay in it with you. You hear me, Issachar?"

"I hear you," said the Levite, "but perchance before you throw more sharp words at my head you will suffer me to speak. Self-murder is a crime, yet I honor this woman, who would shed her own blood rather than the blood of the innocent in sacrifice to Baal, and who refuses to be given in marriage to one she hates; who, moreover, has found strength and grace to trample on the devil worship, if she in truth she has. If, therefore, she will come with us, and we can escape with her, why, let her come; only swear to me, Aziel, that you will make no wife of her till Solomon has heard this tale and given judgment on it."

"That I will swear for him," exclaimed Elissa; "is it not so, Aziel?"

"As you will, lady," he answered. "Issachar, you will have my word that until then she shall be as my sister and no more."

"I hear and I believe you," said Issachar, adding: "and the hour is good, for I shall not be missed until dawn."

So they turned to leave the temple, but although they reached the chambers of Aziel in safety, their hearts, which should have been light still, were heavy with the presage of new sorrow to come.

Scarcely could they have been heavier, indeed, had they seen a white-faced woman creep from the pit of death and follow them stealthily till they had passed their doors, then turn and run at full speed toward the college of the priests of El.

In the chamber of Aziel they found Metem.

"I rejoice to see you back again in safety, since it is more than I thought to do," he said, as they entered, then added, as the black-veiled shape of Elissa followed them into the room, "but who is the lady? Ah! I see the Lady Elissa. Does the Baaltis accompany us upon our journey?"

"Yes," answered Aziel shortly.

"Then with her on the one side and the holy Issachar on the other, it should not lack for blessings, since the evil must be great from which separately or together they are unable to defend us. But, lady, if I may ask, have you bid farewell to your most honored father?"

"Torment me not," murmured Elissa.

"Indeed, I did not wish to, though you may remember that not so long ago you threatened to silence me forever. Well, doubtless your departure is too hurried for farewells, and, fortunately foreseeing it, I have provided spares mules, so that we either you shall be kinder than my words. I go to see that all is prepared. Now eat before you start; presently I will return for you," and he left the chamber.

When he had gone they gathered round the table, on which stood food, but could touch little, for the hearts of all three of them were filled with sad foreboding. Soon they heard a noise as of people talking excitedly outside the palace gates.

"It is Metem with the mules," said Aziel.

"I hope so," answered Elissa.

Again there was silence, which, after a while, was broken by a loud knocking at the door.

"Rise," said Aziel; "Metem comes for us."

"No, no," cried Elissa, "it is Doom that knocks, not Metem."

As the words passed her lips the door was burst open, and through it poured a mob of armed priests, at the head of whom marched the Shadid. By his side was his daughter Mesa, in whose pale face the eyes burned angrily like lamps in a wind.

"Did I not tell you so?" she cried in a shrill voice, pointing at the three. "Behold the Lady Baaltis and her lover, and with them that priest of a false god who called down curses upon our city."

"You told us, indeed, daughter," answered the Shadid; "pardon us if we were loath to believe that such a thing could be." Then with a cry of rage he added, "Seize them and away to the dungeons."

Now Aziel drew his sword and sprang in front of Elissa to protect her, but before he could strike a blow it was struck down from behind, and he was gripped by the hands, gagged, bound, and blindfolded. Then, like a man in a dream, he felt himself carried away through long passages, till at length he reached an airless place, where the gag and bandages were removed.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"In the dungeons of the temple," answered the priests as they left the vault, barring the great door behind them.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SACRILEGE OF AZIEL.

How long he lay in the dungeon, lost in bitter thought and tormented by fears of Elissa, Aziel could not tell, for no light came there to mark the passage of the hours. In the tumult of his mind one terrible thought grew clear; he and Elissa had been taken red-handed, and must pay the price of their sin against the religious customs of the city. For the Baaltis to be found with any man who was not her husband meant death to her and to him, a doom from which there was little chance of escape. To his own fate he was indifferent, but for Elissa and Issachar he mourned bitterly. Truly the Levite and Metem had been wise when they cautioned him, for her sake and his own, to have nothing to do with a priestess of Baal. But he had not listened, his heart would not let him listen, and now in the fulness of their youth and love, the lives of both of them were forfeited.

Worn out with sore and vain regrets Aziel fell at length into a heavy sleep, from which he was awakened by the opening of the door of his dungeon and the entry of priests, grim and silent men, who seized and blindfolded him. Then they led him away up many stairs and along paths so steep that from time to time they paused to rest, till at length he knew, by the sound of voices, that he had reached some place where people were assembled. Here the bandage was removed from his eyes and he stepped backward, recoiling involuntarily from the glare of light, whereon, uttering an exclamation, those who stood near seized and held him. Presently he saw why they had done so, for he was standing on the brink of a great precipice at the back of and dominating the city, while, far beneath him, was a rocky rift along which ran the trade road to the coast. Here upon this dizzy spot was a wide space of rock, walled in upon three sides, the precipice forming the fourth side of the square, in which, seated upon stones that seemed to have been set there in semicircles to serve as judgment chairs, were gathered the head priests and priestesses of El and Baaltis, clad in their sacerdotal robes. To the right and left of these were knots of special priests, among whom he recognized Metem and Sakon, while at his side, but separated from him by armed priests, were Elissa herself, wrapped in a dark veil, and Issachar. Lastly, in front of him, a fire burned upon a little altar, and behind the altar stood a shrine containing a symbolical effigy of Baaltis fashioned of gold and ivory and wood in the shape of a woman with a hundred breasts. Seeing all this, Aziel understood that they three had been brought here for trial and that the priests and priestesses before him were their judges. Indeed, he remembered that the place had been pointed out to him as that where those who had offended against the gods were carried for judgment, to be hurled, if found guilty, down the face of the precipice and left, a shapeless mass of broken bones, to crumble on the roadway at its foot.

After a long and solemn pause, at a sign from the Shadid, he who had been the husband of the dead Baaltis, the veil was removed from Elissa, who looked at Aziel and smiled sadly.

"Do you know the fate that waits us?" the Prince asked of Issachar in Hebrew.

"I know, and I am ready," answered the old Levite, "for since my soul is safe I care little what these dogs do to my body; but, oh, my son, I weep for you, and cursed be the hour when first you saw that woman's face."

"Spare to reproach me in my misfortune," murmured Elissa. "Have I not enough to bear, knowing that I have brought death upon him I love? Oh, curse me not, but pray that my sins may be forgiven me."

"That I will do gladly, daughter," replied Issachar more gently, "seeing that, although you seem to be the cause of them, these things can have happened only by the will of God, and therefore I was wrong to revile you."

Before she could answer the Shadid commanded silence, and at the same moment the woman Mesa stepped from behind the effigy of the goddess.

"Who are you and what do you here?" asked the Shadid, as though he did not know her.

"I am Mesa, the daughter of her who was the Lady Baaltis," she answered, "and my rank is that of mother of the priestesses of Baal. I appear to give true evidence against her, who is the Lady Baaltis, against the Israelitish stranger named Aziel, and the priest of the God of the Jews."

"Speak on and beware what you speak," said the Shadid.

Mesa bowed her head and began.

"From the time that she was anointed I have been suspicious of the Lady Baaltis."

"Why were you suspicious?" asked the Shadid.

The witness let her eyes wander toward Metem, then hesitated. Evidently, for some reason of her own, she did not wish to implicate him.

"I was suspicious," she answered, "because of certain words that came from the lips of the Lady Baaltis when she had been thrown into the holy trance before the altar of sacrifice. As is my duty, I bent over her to hear the message of the gods, but in place of it there came babblings of this stranger and of a meeting to be held with him one hour before moonrise by the pillar of El in the courtyard of the temple. Thereafter for several nights, as was my duty, I hid myself in the pit of offerings in the courtyard and watched. Last night, at an hour before the moonrise, the Lady Baaltis came, disguised, by the secret way, and waited at the pillar, where presently she was joined by the Jew, Aziel, and the Levite, who spoke with her.

"What they said I could not hear, because they were too far from me, but at length they left the temple and I traced them to the chambers of the Jew, Aziel. Then, Shadid, I warned you and the priests, and you came with me and took them. Now, as mother of the priestesses, I demand that justice be done upon these wicked ones, according to the ancient custom, lest the curse of Baaltis should fall upon this city."

When she had finished her evidence with a cold stare of triumph and hate at her rival, Mesa stepped to one side.

"You have heard," said the Shadid, addressing his fellow judges. "Do you need further testimony?"

"Nay," answered their spokesman, "for with you we took them together in the chamber of the Prince Aziel. Set out the law of this matter, O Shadid, and let justice be done according to the strict letter of the law—justice without fear or favor."

"Hearken," said the Shadid. "Last night this woman, the daughter of Sakon, being the Lady Baaltis only elected, met men secretly in the courts of the temple, and accompanied them, or one of them, to the chamber of Aziel, a Prince of Israel, the guest of Sakon. Whether or no she was about to fly with him from the city, which he should have left last night, we cannot tell, and it is needless to inquire. At least, she was with him. This, however, is sure, that they did not sin in ignorance of our law, since with my own mouth I warned them both that if the Lady Baaltis consorts with any man not her husband duly named by her according to her right she must die, and her accomplice with her. Therefore, Aziel, the Israelite, we give you to death, dooming you presently to be hurled from the edge of yonder precipice.

"I am in your power," said the Prince, proudly, "and you can murder me if you will, because forsooth I have offended against some law of Baal, but I tell you, priest, that there are kings in Jerusalem and Egypt who will demand my blood at your hands. I have nothing more to say, except to beseech you to spare the life of the Lady Elissa, since the fault of that meeting was not hers, but mine."

"Prince," answered the Shadid, gravely, "we know your rank and we know also that your blood will be required at our hands, but we who serve our gods cannot betray their law for the fear of any kings. Yet, for so says this same law, it is not needful that you should die, since for you there is a way of escape that leads to safety and great honor, and she who was the cause of your sin is the mistress of its gate. Elissa, holder of the spirit of Baaltis upon earth, if it be your pleasure to name this man husband before us all, then as the spouse of Baaltis he goes free, for he whom the Baaltis chooses cannot refuse her gift of love, but for so long as she shall live must rule with her as Shadid of El. But if you name him not, then, as I have said, he must die, and now. Speak."

"It seems that my choice is small," said Elissa, with a faint smile. "Praying you to pardon me for the deed, to save your life, Prince Aziel, I name you my husband."

Now, Aziel was about to answer her when the Shadid broke in hurriedly. "So be it," he said. "Lady, we hear your choice, and we accept it as we must, but not yet, Prince Aziel, can you take your wife and with her my place and power. Your life is safe, indeed, for since the Baaltis, being unwed, names you as her mate, you have done no sin. Yet she has sinned, and doom awaits her, for against the law she has chosen as husband one who worships a strange god, and of all crimes that is the greatest. Therefore, that you may not take incense and before us all make offering to El and Baaltis upon yonder altar, thus renouncing your faith and entering into ours, or she must die, and you, your rank having passed from you, will be expelled the city."

Now Aziel understood the trap that had been laid for him, and saw in it the handiwork of Sakon and Metem. Elissa having flagrantly violated the religious law, and he being the cause of her crime, even the authority of the Governor of the city could not prevent his daughter and his guest from being put upon their trial. Therefore he had arranged this farce, for in it it would seem to him, whereby both of them might escape the legal consequences of their crime, trusting, doubtless, to accident and the future to unravel this web of forced marriage, and to free Aziel from an ecclesiastical rank which he had not sought. It was only necessary that Elissa should formally choose him as her husband, and that Aziel should go through the rite of throwing a few grains of incense upon an altar, and, the law satisfied, they would be both free and safe. What he and those who worked with him had forgotten was that this offering of incense to Baal would be the most deadly of crimes in the eyes of any Jew, one, indeed, which, were he alone concerned, he would die rather than commit.

When the Prince heard the decree and the full terror of the choice came home to his mind, his blood turned cold and for a while his senses were bewildered. There was no escape for him; either he must abjure his faith at the price of his own life, or, because of it, the woman whom he loved now, before his eyes, must suffer a most horrible and sudden death. It was hideous to think of, and yet how could he do this sin in the face of heaven and of these ministers of Satan? The moment was at hand; a priest held out to him a bowl of incense, a golden bowl, he noticed idly, with handles of green stone fashioned in the likeness of Baaltis, whose servant he was asked to declare himself, He, Aziel of the royal house of Israel, a servant of the Baal and Baaltis, nay, a high priest of their worship! It was monstrous, it might not be. But Elissa! Well, she must die; her life could not be bought at such a price.

"I cannot do it," he gasped, with dry lips, thrusting aside the bowl.

Now all looked astonished, for his refusal had not been foreseen, and once more the woman Mesa appeared before the altar and said in her cold voice:

"The Jew whom the Lady Baaltis has chosen as husband will not do homage to her gods. Therefore, as mother of the priestesses, I demand that Elissa, daughter of Sakon, be put to death and the throne of Baaltis be purged of one who has defiled it, lest the vengeance of the goddess should fall upon this city."

The Shadid motioned her to be silent and addressed Aziel.

"We pray you to think a while," he said, "before you give one to death whose sin is that, being the high priestess of our worship, she has named an unbeliever to fill the throne of El and be her husband. But of pity for her we give you time to think."

Now, Sakon, taking advantage of the pause, rushed forward, and, throwing his arms about Aziel's knees, implored him, in heart-broken accents, to save his only child from so horrible a fate, saying that did he refuse because of his religious scruples he would be a dog and a coward and the scorn of all honest men forever, since it was for love of him that she had broken the priestly law, to violate which was death, and, although she had been warned of her danger, yet in his wickedness and folly he had brought her to this pass. But Issachar thrust him aside and broke in with fiery words.

"Hearken not to this man, Aziel," he said, "who strives to work upon your weakness to the ruin of your soul. What! to save the life of one woman, whose fair face has brought so much trouble upon us all, would you deny your God and become the thrall of Baal and Ashtoreth? Let her die, since die she must, and keep your own heart pure, for be assured, should you do otherwise, Jehovah, whom you renounce, will swiftly be avenged on you and her. At the beginning I warned you and you would not listen; now, Aziel, I warn you again, and woe, woe, woe to you should you shut your ears to my message!" and, lifting his hand toward the skies, he began to pray aloud.

Meanwhile Metem, who had been drawing near, spoke in a low voice.

"Prince," he said, "I am not chicken-hearted and there are so many young women in the world that one more or less can scarcely matter; still, although she threatened to murder me three days ago, I cannot bear to see this one come to such an end. Prince, do not heed the howlings of that old fanatic, but remember, that after all you are the cause of this lady's plight, and be a man. Can you for the sake of your own scruples, however worthy, doom a woman to such an end?" and he nodded toward the precipice and shuddered.

"Is there no other way?" Aziel asked him hoarsely.

"None, I swear it. They did not wish to kill her, except that wildcat Mesa, who seeks her place, but having put her on her trial, if you persist, they must, because this is one of the laws that cannot be broken for favor or for gold. Perhaps we might have found some other plan, but none of us dreamed that you would refuse so small a thing for the sake of a woman whom you swore you loved. Remember, this offering of incense is but a form to which you are forced against your will—you can do penance for it afterward, when I have arranged for both of you to escape the city. If your God can be angry with you for burning a pinch of dust to save a woman, who at the least has dared much for you, then give me Baal, for he is less cruel."

Now Aziel looked toward him who held the bowl of incense, when Elissa, who all this while had stood silent, stepped forward and spoke.

"Prince Aziel," she said, in a calm and quiet voice, "I named you husband to save your life, but with all my strength I pray of you, do not this thing to save mine, which is of little value and perhaps better ended. Remember, Prince Aziel, that being what you are, a Jew, this act of offering, however small it seems, is yet the greatest of sins, and one with which you should not dare to stain your soul for the sake of a woman who has chanced to love you to your sorrow. Be guided, therefore, by the true wisdom of Issachar, and by my humble prayer. Make an end of your doubts and let me die, knowing that we do but part a while, since in the gates of death I shall wait for you, Prince Aziel."

Before Aziel could answer the Shadid, either because his patience was outworn, or because he wished to put him to a sharper trial, uttered a command. Thereupon four priests seized Elissa by the wrists and ankles, and carrying her to the edge of the precipice, thrust her back till she hung over it, her long hair streaming on the wind, and her white and ghastly face turned upward to the sky. Then they paused, waiting for the signal to let her go. The Shadid raised his wand and said:

"Is it your pleasure that this woman should die or live, Prince Aziel? Decide swiftly, for my arm is weak, and when the wand falls opportunity will have passed from you."

Now Aziel's eyes were fixed upon the wand, and the intense silence was broken only by Sakon's cry of despair. Metem wrung his hands in grief, Issachar veiled his eyes with his robe to shut out the sight of dread, and the priest, with the bowl of incense, thrust it toward Aziel imploringly.

In some seconds, three perhaps, though to him it seemed an age, the heart of Aziel was racked and torn in this terrific contest; then he glanced at the agonized face of the doomed woman, and just as the wand began to bend, his human love and pity conquered.

"May He whom I blaspheme forgive me," he murmured, then he extended his hand to the "sacrifice," and taking the incense he cast it into the flames on the altar, repeating after the Shadid, "By this act I give myself to you and worship you, El and Baaltis, the only true gods."

The echo of Aziel's voice died away and the fumes of the incense rose in a dense column in the quiet air. Then he turned, "I will it seemed as though the smoke of it took the form of an avenging angel, holding in its hand a sword of flame, wherewith to drive away his perjured soul from heaven, as our first forefathers were driven from the gates of Paradise.

To be continued.

END OF SECOND-STORY HOTELS.

They Grew Shabbier and Shabbier Until the Inevitable Auction Takes Place.

One distressing feature about the old hotels of New York is that they rarely bear their advancing years with dignity. The larger ones are more fortunate in the late days of their existence. But cheapness and a loss of caste come to them as surely as less honorable decline overtakes some of the smaller establishments. These, indeed, approach the end of their usefulness in really pathetic dejection. Only casual disasters serve to call many of these places to the public mind. But a mention of their names brings to one a consciousness of an undefined, hazy acquaintance with their existence derived from a view of the name painted on an upper window or possibly on a door that opens on a flight of stairs which leads to the office of the establishment; for these second-story hotels are among those that are gradually passing away. Some of them still exist downtown in the business districts of the city. But as no similar places further up arise to fill the space left vacant by their destruction, they grow rarer every year. The end comes quietly. Some day an auctioneer's flag floats in front of the place and ill-dressed men jostle one another through the halls. They inspect eagerly the faded carpets, the cheap furniture and the worn linen as well as the chipped glass and china, the well-rubbed plated table ware and the other remnants of decayed gentility and former prosperity. When they are out of the house the career of the old hotel comes to an end. No suicide ever attracts attention to it. No sudden death under circumstances of horror may cloud a family name with shame calls the old place from oblivion. These are the means by which some of these places find themselves unexpectedly the centre of a tragic interest. They are respectable enough and their record is as clear as that of the shiny new hotels. One of them is typical of all in the general features. A room provided with the customary counter and letter racks was reached by a flight of stairs that ascends from the street. An elderly man, who must have learned his duties at some earlier and more favored place, was busying himself behind the counter near a window through which the light came faintly. The panes were dusty and the structure of the elevated road made daylight dim always. Opposite him were two untidy boys. One of them was sleeping, his head thrown back against the wall and his mouth open. The other read a paper. Opening into the office was a writing room. A few sheets of paper were scattered over the top of a small table. A few rusty pens and a bottle of ink, from which the top had been broken, stood on the table. A man, who was obviously not a New Yorker, stared out of one of the windows where there was no more interesting view than a stretch of narrow if busy street. The cable cars blocked that. No other room for the entertainment of guests was visible beyond a small "reception room." A burnished silver water pitcher stood on a marble-topped table in the centre of the worn carpet. A few chairs sat stiffly against the shoddy wallpaper. Everything was dusty and shabby. The only life audible in the place came from the street outside.

The patrons of these hotels appear to be countrymen who have enough money to come to the city, or men who come from other cities and are too much "broke" to go to other places. Nobody in them looks as if pleasure had been the cause of his presence. The maximum price in these places is usually the minimum price in other hotels. They may not be a great deal cheaper than other better known establishments, but they look a great deal cheaper. And that is almost as important. While the small hotels decline gradually until they finally drop out of existence under the auctioneer's hammer, there is always a chance for the larger buildings. When for one reason or another prosperity has departed, there are several means by which new proprietors attempt to woo it back. These are familiar enough to all New Yorkers who walk through the streets with their eyes open. To redecorate the bar and the office, to put palms about the dining room, commence to serve a table d'hôte, and put in an orchestra. These are preliminary efforts which are effective so long as the curtains are left open and the passing crowd is allowed to see the new improvements. After these are made the hotel may or may not succeed. Whatever the fate may be there will be no means by which a professional observer will be able to tell why there was failure or success as the result. It takes a professional eye to tell why some hotels should become highly successful while others which seem to possess as many advantages should decline and fail to attain the prosperity that comes to others. That is one of the mysteries of the profession which the uninitiated cannot answer.

THE CAVE OF AVARICE.

By CLINTON ROSS.

(Copyright, 1898, by Clinton Ross.)

How I came to Corpus Christi in Sonora I need not tell, and I am glad I need not, for it is at the best a shameful story. Yet there I fancied I could put my past away. I was sure those I had wronged would not follow so far, and I felt safe—if a man can be safe from his memories. For memories now and then would come, would bother; then I longed for money with which to make restitution with a hurried desire. For what I had left was but a pittance, to keep me for many years in this simple Mexican village. I had lost most that I had stolen in many ventures taken in the vain hope.

Have you ever been in Mexico? Can you imagine that village far away over the border, its long, sunny street, between the adobe houses its listless folk, with more of the Indian than the Spaniard. High above on both sides was the street-scattered slopes of the mountains, and a quarter mile up the valley on a rounded hill stood the old monastery of Corpus Christi, builded, it was said, by a generation that had known Montezuma. Who knows? Perhaps the monks did—these few brown-cowled brothers, the survivors of the great order. As I sat idly smoking I wondered, thinking how much easier a monastery might have been for me.

I myself did not make the acquaintance of the monks. The villagers sometimes chatted with me. I knew all the affairs of my fat landlady and her black-eyed daughter, about whom three young fellows were passionate. These folk had been curious when I had appeared on donkey back from over the slope. But habit stifles curiosity, and I lived on, almost the sole guest of the old inn. For the mountain village was out of the way of travel. Centuries had passed since it had been a station on the route to the now long abandoned silver mines of the mountains. And days and months passed for me as they will in such an out-of-the-way place, where the events and talk of the world seem of no moment, and as I say, I longed with an ever-increasing desire for all I had frittered away—honor and position and love I had lost in the New England town, where the winters might be bitter and the summers fierce, but where the old habit of my Anglo-Saxon blood called. Ah, if I only had money to repair that wrong. For gold I longed and of its potentiality I dreamed.

I had been at Corpus Christi a year before the two who were to be my comrades appeared. One—I knew him as John Fenton—was a little, clerkly, bookish man, with a certain fright always in his sunken eyes; yet plainly a man of gentle breeding. The other, who called himself Dorden, was his antithesis, a burly, red-faced, oath-flinging bravo. What interests, I wondered, did they have in common. But I did not dare ask them of their past, of their bond of union, lest they should ask of mine. Possibly they had the same reasons, for they never inquired. We knew that we belonged somewhere over the border. Isolation, and the same conditions of past, make strange companionship. In desperation among these simple village folk—I struck up a friendship with Dorden. Many a sunny day we passed in the shaded court of the inn, playing gloomily with a greasy pack Dorden had. On one thing we agreed: we wanted money; that alone would repair the cloak of respectability we had worn threadbare.

As we talked little Fenton would smile gloomily, and would disappear up the slope to the monastery. For he strangely had made an acquaintance there; and every day he would return with a pile of old manuscripts from the library of the place; records—forgotten by scholars—of the early history of Sonora. Then Dorden let drop the only remark he ever had about the pasts of either; Fenton was a scholar, a linguist, who had been a tutor at a New England college. Again I wondered what had brought together these two, so dissimilar.

One evening—ah, I never may forget it!—we were sitting by flickering candles in my room, Dorden and I, at our gaming, and Fenton reading a manuscript he had brought that day from the monastery. The monks, an illiterate lot, did not care, or note, their treasures of the time when Spain was great, and her venturesome gentlemen were about these far mountains seeking gold and its power. Possibly these brothers of Corpus Christi wondered at this little pale-faced man, who amused his exile with papers that to them had no value; for, as I have said, scholarship had died in that cloister.

"If I were so," said Fenton looking at us suddenly.

"Eh, what's so, Bob?" said Dorden.

"That Miguel Santos left his treasures in the mountains back from Corpus Christi."

"H——," said Dorden, "stop your —— lingo. No such luck."

"Luck!" said I wearily, maligning my own.

"Listen," said the little man, whose past I say I wondered at, and he read:

"'In those days the Governor ruled Sonora not so much as Miguel Santos. Nay, Santos laid tribute of the Governor and of all who passed; and Miguel Santos's wealth was great beyond imagination. Yea, every piece of gold, they say, was bloodstained!'"

"There are others," said Dorden, dealing the cards.

"Listen," said the other rather eagerly.

"'But in his old age remorse seized Santos and he retired into the monastery of Corpus Christi, where he led in every respect a saintly life—save in the single one, that he made no restitution. To this day the treasure is hid in the mountains—wealth greater than all the King of Spain ever had from Peru.'"

"Eh," said Dorden, "I wish I'd it. It's something, Bob, to know as much as you about languages."

But Fenton looked at us both as if he knew still more. From the table he took a piece of yellowed parchment and held it against the candle.

"He seems to have been," said Dorden, "a sort o' Captain Kidd. I s'pose they've been diggin' and diggin' in 'em mountains."

"Wait," said Fenton quietly. "Up there in the library of Corpus Christi there's a pile of ancient manuscripts that no one seems to care at all about—the account books of forgotten abbots, things of no earthly use except to the antiquarian," or the historian. But they've amused me."

"You fellows 're easily amused with 'em books," said Dorden. "Now, I'd rather see a Sunday New York paper, with the murders and divorces and politics."

"Well," said Fenton, "I hadn't, you know. So I've found some fun up there nosing about. I've almost been able to forget."

"You're chicken-livered," said Dorden.

"Well, I wish I'd money."

"We'd go back, eh, and buy up somebody," said Dorden. "We'd have a house on Fifth avenue, and another at Newport, and we'd run horses at Sheepshead, and we'd 'ave our wives and darters' dresses and diamonds all listed in the papers."

"Shut up," said Fenton. "Don't talk about wives and daughters."

"He's a bit ticklish on some subjects," said Dorden. "Well, go on with your yarn, little 'un."

"Well," said Fenton. "I said to myself, if this Miguel Santos became a monk at Corpus Christi, there's probably somewhere or other about this pile of papers something more about him. Finally I came to some papers of the Abbot Pedro Juan. I knew he was the Abbot of Santos's time. So I broke open the seal. Then I found this paper, written by the dying Santos."

"You don't say. Who'd have thought it?" Dorden exclaimed.

"I had some trouble in making it out," Fenton went on.

"Well, what of it," said Dorden. "Does he tell where the money's to be had? We can go back to New York and float a company. The Santos Treasure Company, $10,000,000 paid in. A few chances at 50 cents."

"Listen, you fool," said Fenton, eagerly. "Here is what is written: 'I, the monk Ambrose, once Miguel Santos, do confess. When I am 70 and in security I bethink myself that death cannot be far away. The church declares that the wicked shall be burned forever. If that be indeed true—and no man ever came back to deny it—it behooves me to prepare. I have thought me of the treasure I gained evilly. Should I restore it to those whence I had taken? But the lust for gold makes more crime than the lust for woman. It has seemed to me, then, that I should put this treasure away where no man should find it. I know now my sin. I could not part with that which has cost me so much—perhaps even my soul. To the cave of the underground river I had the casks carried. Then I had a wall built twenty rods from the cave's entrance, and I walled the treasure there against the roar of the stream that sees no light. Twenty men worked at this, and I watched, leaving a guard down the slope. In the wall is an iron door, which opens if you touch it at a certain spot. When the work was done I gave the laborers poison, and in the morning all lay dead. God rest my soul. One by one I took the bodies——'"

"He took the bodies!" said Dorden, leaning over. "All that stuff is buried up in 'em mountains!"

"'I took the bodies through the door in the wall to the cliff over the underground river, and dropped them in one by one. Then I returned to my followers, who guarded below, saying I had sent the other score into Chihuahua. And then I discharged all and came down the mountain to the monastery, and to the abbot I said, "I would repent me of my sins." "First," he answered, "thou must give all thy treasure to mother Church." Then I lied, and told him I had squandered it all.

"'I said to myself that for one who has committed so many sins the death of twenty men and the lie to the abbot cannot add to the burden. For from that time on I should lead me a life of prayer, of repentance. So in truth have I tried to live, save twice a year, when I have visited the cave of the river. Then I have gloated over the coffers on the cliff in the cave. Then voices have come up from the river, and said: "Accursed, accursed!" Yea, accursed is it. May it curse some other as it has me, any monk or man who may find it. Here the writing stops," Fenton said. "But there is one line more in another hand. 'The devil has the soul of him who was known to the world as Miguel Santos.'"

"What a fool that old chap was, anyway," said Dorden. "With all that money he might have had a time fit for a king, without botherin' himself about hell."

"I said that money," I said. "Do you suppose it's there now?"

"Do you 'spose it is. It fairly makes my mouth water," Dorden observed.

"If it were there," said the pale-faced Fenton "I've given up so much—to get money."

"No more than I," said Dorden.

"No more than I," said I.

But I was watching the yellowed parchment which Dorden was holding, as I have said, low over the candle. Black lines were appearing there. I gasped as I saw them. Was this that old secret? Had he written it on the back of his confession? Should we know it, then? Should we get the gold with which I might make my restitution?

"The paper's back, Fenton," I cried.

Fenton turned the paper, scared, while Dorden sent the greasy pack scattering.

"Read it—for God's sake, read it! Can you?"

Fenton read in a low voice:

"'As thou followest the disused road to the silver mine thou wilt come about five Spanish miles to a projecting rock. Going to the western side of this rock, pace due west fifty yards, which will bring thee against the clump of bushes by the cliffside. Under these thou wilt find the opening of the cave. Push the upper-hand corner of the iron door and it will swing open and thou wilt be cursed as was Miguel Santos."

"It's gospel truth, then," said Dorden.

"That he was cursed," said Fenton, starting.

"Damn the curse," Dorden replied, "that the treasure is there."

"Yes, it may be there," said Fenton, rising.

"But the old road the fellow speaks o'," Dorden said. "Haven't you read o' it in 'em papers?"

"It's the path to the left of the monastery," said Fenton.

"We'll go there at sunrise, then," said Dorden, rising. "We'll divide."

"If it's true," said I.

"It's got to be true," Dorden retorted. "My luck has got to change some time."

Fenton sat there, the sweat pouring from his pale face.

"You poor, limp fool," Dorden said, contemptuously. "Now, the first thing is for us to go to bed."

He seemed to direct us like a Captain, and we readily allowed him the leadership. Yet I fancied something dangerous in his eyes, and I remembered that after I was in bed I arose and bolted my door. Was it for this he drew me into a dream? Aye, what if we should find that treasure? And then my dream maddened me, and I tossed till the sun came over the mountain top—the mountain, perhaps, of the cave of the river.

We started out after breakfast, stealthily, as if we were bent on some thievish errand. The manner of thieves seemed to fall to us easily.

At first the search promised well, for the old road by the monastery was a marvellous piece of engineering for its day and time. Nature, so forceful in Mexico after all the years, had not destroyed man's work. So anxiously we followed that road, and forgotten the way, which reminded us nothing so much as of an old Roman road, such as you may see along the Mediterranean or the Adriatic. Countless treasure perhaps had been dragged over it in the old days before the mine to which it led had been abandoned. Yes, it told of old intrigues, old passions. On we went doggedly, through the thick growth, no one of us with a word, mutely following Dorden's lead. Two hours must have passed—the growth made it tediously slow—before at last we saw the high projecting rock. Yes, the rock then existed! My heart beat uproariously and I knew by my companions felt from the pallor even Dorden displayed. From the western side, at the centre of the rock's base, he began to pace.

"One, two——"

Fenton and I followed. Yes, there was the sheer face of the cliff and the thick trees and bushes at its base. We stood on one of the layers of rotting trunks and leaves. A snake, so deadly in Sonora, ran out before him, yet Dorden persisted, and again we were favored, for we came directly, with scarcely an error, on the opening. Dorden had brought a machete and now proceeded to cut the bushes away and then we heard a low, dis and rumble, as of subdued thunder.

"The river," Fenton cried at this repeated evidence. But what we saw was more encouraging. For the cave stopped at about twenty feet. It was walled by masonry, lichen covered. A hundred wriggling creatures were on the surface. This structure was, indeed, what Miguel Santos, dead a full century and a half, had promised; and there was the iron door, rusted and discolored, so that we wondered if, indeed, it would answer to the pressure on the upper left hand corner; wondered if in all the years the treasure had not been taken. Again it was Dorden making the pace while we stood waiting. The road to riches—to the cave of Santo's avarice—seemed easy, indeed.

The air that swept our faces was singularly fresh and sweet, due to the waters that we heard now in a deafening roar. Then the rush of air seemed to stop. Dorden had no difficulty in lighting the candle, which gave a feeble glare in the vast place.

"Careful," he said, as he advanced; and we saw we were on the edge of a vast precipice, with the undistinguishable mass of the roaring river far, far below. We all three turned about, our faces blanching. And then a strange thing occurred. A pale white light began to be diffused. I could not account for it then; though now I understand that the shifting sun had reached some opening along the course of that underground river. It was a vast stream, indeed; a sheer fall of many hundred feet, as we now were able to see. The further shore we could not tell in that half light—now it had become almost like early twilight; but it seemed to me as broad as the Hudson. Whence did it come, and whither were those waters carried in their mad whirl? But I was interrupted by Dorden's cry. He was pointing toward a projecting cliff, which hung out far over the water. It was approached by a narrow neck, so that it formed a peninsula jutting into the air above the roaring waters. The space might have had a diameter of fifty feet. But what we saw astounded us even in our expectations, now raised by the success of every step of the search. On this space were above a score of iron chests, their lids all opened, revealing in the increasing light the sheen of diamonds, the blue and green of sapphires, and the glow of rubies. They lay there beckoning, as Miguel Santos had left them. From many of the chests was the absorbing yellow glare of golden coins; so many that in the moment we could not calculate their number. Yet we knew that here was wealth such as Cressus's incalculable riches of gold and precious stones. But why had they been put on that jutting rock? I questioned.

I don't believe the others even questioned. Now that we could see quite