The Counterstroke

By Ambrose Pratt

CHAPTER XII—Continued

SEEMINGLY satisfied with her appearance he smiled and turned to Cressingham, to start back, however, at sight of the Englishman's bandaged face and battered looks. But he quickly controlled his emotion, and extending both hands gave the young man a cordial grasp.

"Welcome to my house, Lord Francis Cressingham," he cried in English. "All that I have is yours. It is a poor endowment, but a man cannot give more than he has."

"My Lord," replied Cressingham gravely. "I thank you. I should apologize for my unfortunate appearance, but I fear to inflict on your Lordship an unmerited aspersion, since I have suffered at the hands of one of your Lordship's servants who I know acted irresponsibly."

The Count turned inquiringly to Madame, who answered: "My father, it was the Prince. Lord Francis lay bound and helpless at his mercy: behold the mercy of the Prince!"

The Count smiled, and his face in that smile was the face of a Satan, powerful, inscrutable, scornful, unutterably cruel. "The Prince acted on his own responsibility, believe me, my Lord," he said slowly. "I never ill-use a man whom I intend to kill."

Cressingham felt a shuddering coldness at his heart, but he answered with calm indifference: "Your Lordship is a man of great mind who is satisfied with the supreme. Meauer natures and lesser intellects seek to improve on the punishment of death, unable to realize or understand that what is absolute is best."

"You mean?"

"That in the hearts of the multitude hope springs perennially so strong that pain with life prolonged is ever preferable to an instant painless death."

"My dear Lord Francis, you speak of ordinary pain. I have known men pray for death——"

"While in agony."

"True, but for the moment, of your goodness, let the question pass. Supper has been long spread and I doubt not you are both hungry."

Offering his arm with a courtly bow to his daughter, the old gentleman, always assisted by the dumb slaves, led the way to a little dining-room beyond the staircase, and there Cressingham beheld a small square table set for four in the most modern Parisian style.

They seated themselves to find a printed menu before the plate of each; and this card was so replete and promiseful of all good things that it was hard to choose a dish among them.

A negro footman stood silently beside each chair waiting commands with stiff formality, and a fourth stood by the door. The manacled slaves took up a position one on each side the Count, the chain that bound them passing behind his back.

The Count l'Attala then beckoned to the fourth negro.

"Miss Elliott is dressing?" he demanded.

The negro bowed low, and Madame glanced quickly at Cressingham.

"Bid her hasten!" said the Count sharply.

The negro bowed again and prepared to depart, but on that instant the door opened and there entered the room appareled in a shimmering satin empire gown, whose jeweled drapings spoke of bygone courts and queenly gatherings—Miss Francine Elliott.

CHAPTER XIII

CONDEMNED TO DEATH.

CRESSINGHAM sprang to his feet; the Count remained seated. Miss Elliott swept gracefully across the room to the unoccupied chair; she nodded to the Count, bowed to Madame and gave Cressingham her hand, starting and paling a little to mark his battered face. "An accident?" she asked tremulously.

He nodded, unable for a second to answer, but his eyes told her how glad he was to see her once again.

The Count beckoned to the fourth negro, who immediately came forward and stood beside Miss Elliott's chair. She gave a hurried order and turned again to Cressingham. "You are not seriously hurt, I hope?"

"No, a few days should recover me. But you, are you well?"

"In health, yes." Her glance spoke volumes.

The Count d'Attala frowned and spoke to Cressingham: "To resume our conversation, my Lord——"

"A sad theme to discuss before ladies," interrupted Cressingham.

"That depends on the manner in which it is discussed. Death is of itself not an incident to stir a single tremor in a sane and well regulated mind. Do you fear death, Kate?"

"No, father, not I," said Madame. "Not that I want to die, but when the old Captain comes my way recruiting, he'll find me ready to enlist."

"And you, Miss Elliott?"

The girl smiled a little sadly, then answered: "I don't think I fear death, very much, Count. It is really not so very terrible a thing; indeed, at times its very contemplation is a comfort, since it offers a refuge to the hopeless before whose portals all the stings of life are forced to pause."

"You see, my Lord," said the Count grimly, "your fears were needless." He turned to Miss Elliott: "Lord Cressingham and I were disputing a certain point. He contended that death is of itself the best punishment one man may inflict upon another."

Cressingham lifted a mouthful of dainty to his lips, and answered presently: "I think I understand you, sir, but I cannot see the need of such immediate haste. After the ladies have retired we might resume the conversation."

"You must allow me to be the best judge of that necessity, my Lord," said the Count, and he slowly bit off and munched a piece of bread and caviare.

Madame and Miss Elliott stared at the two men silently, and without evincing a desire to eat.

Cressingham's nerves were on stretch, but his blood was up, and he ate quite heartily, as though enjoying himself, at perfect ease.

"You see," went on the Count, "I have determined that the incident we spoke of shall visit you tomorrow There only remains to arrange the manner of your dissolution"

"I understand," said Cressingham Miss Elliott grew of a sudden very white and her eyes glowed like stars

"If you would prefer a lingering death," resumed the Count, "I have no desire to thwart your wishes I have on hand a large assortment of tortures from which you are at liberty to choose Some would postpone the final moment for a week, thus allowing you full scope to put your theories to the test"

The Count ordered wine, and when it had arrived sat back and sipped a glass. Cressingham followed suit; his appetite had fled, but he forced himself to appear indifferent, vowing inwardly that he would not let this monster have the satisfaction of discerning in him one single sign of terror or confusion.

"Perhaps, Kate, you could oblige your friend with an idea culled from your experience," suggested the Count with a cruel smile.

Madame colored slowly. "I beg you to excuse me," she answered.

"You then, Miss Elliott?"

Francine turned if possible paler than before. "This is all some horrid jest," she cried.

The Count smiled again. "My dear young lady, I never jest," he said; "I am too old to play the fool. Come, have you no suggestion?"

"None except that you kill me, too!" She seemed about to faint and swayed towards Cressingham, but he sent her a glance that gave her sudden strength.

The Count bent upon her a countenance of severe reproach. "What, you dare to say that you are tired of life! Ah, bah, you have scarcely tasted it, besides you are a woman. You think now that you love this young man, perhaps. Believe me, that will pass. You are beautiful, young; there are many years before you. Death, no! I have other views for you."

She was silent; he eyed her a moment, then turned to Cressingham. "It seems that we shall be obliged to decide the matter between ourselves, my Lord."

"Best, I think," said Cressingham.

"Ah-m," he cleared his throat and gave the young man a burning, searching glance. "What of a bullet through the heart or brain? Death would be almost instantaneous."

"Brutal," objected Cressingham.

"True, quite true! Science has of late years so refined these matters for us! We shall therefore pass by suffocation, drowning, the rope, the dagger and the coarser poisons. There remains to consider a few comfort-giving powders and to choose one or some of them."

"Exactly. I have heard that morphia——"

"A good groundwork, my Lord, wherewith to induce sleep, but a death-dealing dose often causes pain. Now if you will allow me to offer a suggestion?"

"Why certainly; are you not master of ceremonies?"

"Ha, ha, ha! quite so. Well, morphia first to bring you sleep and dreams, visions glorious, my lord, for morphia is nothing but a form of that hasheesh of which the ancients were so fond. But mingled with the morphia a little aconite and then in the midst of splendid dreams will come death, a darker dream than the others, but who shall say less sensuous or beautiful?"

"Excellent!"

"It is agreed then?"

"Why, yes."

"I see you handle that knife, my Lord, with, what shall I say—a murderous intention in your eyes. I shall spare you the trouble of attempting to use it fruitlessly. Mark this button on my chair. Observe, I turn it—thus. Ah, you see!"

As he turned the button, Cressingham and the two ladies were on a sudden rendered rigid and helpless as stone figures where they sat, and they endured moreover tortures unspeakable.

"You hear that clicking sound?" said the Count. "It scarcely is necessary to explain the matter to persons of your intelligence. You are all seated on electric chairs, this button controls the circuit. So! I switch it off, you are released! But beyond that, my Lord, these negroes about us are my servants. You must surely have thought me lavish of display to require so many to wait on us at table." He laughed, a long, low, hideous chuckle of fiendish mirth it was.

Cressingham commenced to despair, for he now fully realized how utterly helpless was his position, but with a violent effort he kept his self control and asked: "At what hour, sir, do you intend that I shall die?"

"At noon tomorrow!"

Cressingham was about to speak when a loud rap came to the door and a tall negro servant entered.

"What is it?" asked the Count.

"A cable, Highness."

"Read it aloud!"

The man unfolded the paper in his hand. "Khan Barbaroka — Perigord — Eruted—Semaphore."

"The translation, fool! do you think I carry cyphers in my head?"

"Pardon, Highness. 'Expedition sailed this afternoon, Perigord commanding. Cressingham blamed for Katherin's escape. Elopement suspected. Police of all nations awake. Orders given for European coast lines to be searched for secret cable stations, commencing east. Have warned Peluchi. Keep Cressingham alive without fail till I arrive. He is my prisoner. Frederick.'"

The Count de'Attala uttered a grim laugh. "The fool presumes to give me orders, he shall see! Really, my Lord, I feel quite a humanitarian in your regard. The Prince will undoubtedly be here tomorrow evening anticipating a fine feast of revenge. The fellow is a coarse brute at heart, who would put you to all manner of inconveniences. We shall, however, forestall him."

Cressingham shivered. "Thanks, sir; I perfectly appreciate your amiable intentions," he said with satire; "you will kill me painlessly at noon tomorrow, less to save me tortures though than to spite your son-in-law."

"Pardon me, spite is a bad word, and discourteous—say disappoint."

"Ah, a thousand apologies—disappoint."

"Until noon tomorrow, my Lord, everything I have is yours."

"Including liberty?"

"Everything," interrupted the Count, "with the single exception of my daughter's company. I need her, for we have many matters to converse upon—eh, Katherin?"

"Yes, [illegible]" Madame's manner was painfully subdued; she was pale and pensive, and Cressingham, obser[illegible] narrowly, thought her a little fearful too.

The Count nodded to the manacled attendants, who at once lifted him to his feet. "You will excuse me, my Lord. I seldom eat much supper, and I have business. Come, Katherin!"

Madame arose too and took his proffered arm. The Count turned at the door: "My servants will show you to a room when you are weary"—he gave her a coarse chuckle—'that is, if you need separate accommodation, my Lord. Here is a lady who was just now anxious to die with you, possibly she will be disposed to lighten your latest hours. If so do not hesitate on my account, for on this domain exist neither conventions, prejudices, morals——"

"Nor manners, sir!" interrupted Cressingham hotly, starting upwards as he spoke, his face ablaze with passion.

"Tut, tut," said the Count, smilingly shrugging his shoulders; "manners are conventions; here we are always natural, and say what we think if it amuses us. I am sorry my suggestion failed to please you, for beside Miss Elliott there is no other woman on this isle but Kate, and her I need tonight, unhappily. You must try to forgive me, my Lord."

"Ah, bah!"

"Exactly—'ah, bah'—'tis an expressive phrase. By the way, there is a little warning I should give you before we part. Until noon tomorrow, as I have already told you, all that I possess is yours, including your liberty. But see that you are to be found at noon tomorrow! This island is small, scarce three miles square, 'tis inhabited only by my people, but it is mountainous, and you perchance might find some tempting hole to hide in. Well in that case, my Lord, you will be sought out quite leisurely, and perhaps before you are found my son-in-law will have arrived. You understand? He is a devil, that man, and loves inflicting pain. If he has nothing else to do, he tortures animals or insects to pass away his time. I wish to save you from his mercy (I am aware you think it is because I wish to spite him); in reality it is because you happen to be an Englshman, and I love the English. Good-night, my Lord."

"A demain, sir."

"A demain, vraiment, et a la morte." His chuckle sounded far down the corridor, even after the door had closed, and Cressingham was alone with Francine Elliott. They looked at each other silently for long, then two big tears fell splashing from the girl's eyes on to her gown.

"For heaven's sake don't weep, dear," said the man.

She stifled a sob. "It won't help us, will it?" and tried to smile, but her lips trembled pitifully.

He stooped above her and kissed a loose strand of her hair. "Darling," he said brokenly, "the worst of it all is that I am powerless now to help you."

She started to her feet. "Tell me everything that has happened since we parted, tell me why I am here, why you are to die, everything!"

He did as he was bid, and two long hours were spent in the recital. Francine heard of her father's condition in dry-eyed, speechless misery; she listened throughout like one in a dream, but she heard all, understood all, and at the end; when Cressingham had no more to tell, she put her hand upon his arm and said—

"There is no hope for either you or me, Lord Francis, we are in the hands of a human tiger; escape is impossible. This tiny little island is inhabited only by the Count, his grandson and a score or two of negroes and mongrel Europeans, everyone of whom is a ruffian steeped in crime. I have been here now six days and have been everywhere, seen everything that may be seen, and studied all the creatures that surround us. The Count has not sought to control my actions and does not now seek to control yours, because he well knows such precautions are entirely needless. To escape we should need wings."

"Or a boat," muttered Cressingham.

"There are only two boats on the island," sighed the girl, "and they are always kept securely chained when not in use."

"In another hour we shall have daylight," said the man. "I shall then explore the place—who knows, dear; some kind fate may befriend us."

The girl sighed, and said: "Then take me with you, will you please, Lord Francis. Let us spend the last few hours together that are left us.

"Us?" he queried.

"Yes, us! do you think I should care to live without—hope?"

"Francine!"

"I mean it!"

"You would kill yourself?"

"Not that. I have not the courage. But you are an English gentleman. I put my life and honor in your hands. You will kill me when the last comes; promise me!"

He shook his head. "No, dear, I'll not do that; you are in no immediate peril. I think, dear, they will not try to harm you in any way, they have no reason to. Besides, you must be rescued one day, soon I hope, for Perigord will never rest till he has fulfilled his mission. Moreover, I depend on you to clear my name for me, the name which that villain has tarnished. No, Francine, you must live if only for my sake."

She smiled sadly. "My father is dying, you are about to die. What is there left in life for me?"

"Come, come, dear, I haven't given up hope yet, nor shall I till the very end."

"Hope, what is that with us, Lord Francis? A despairing effort to postpone facing the inevitable."

"While life lasts, Francine, hope is the mainspring of ambition. It gives me ambition now to work and find a way from here for both of us. It gives me wider vision and points to better days, to longer life and love——"

"Ah, you are brave—but you have not seen, you cannot understand."

"Dear, let us talk a moment of ourselves. The last time that we met you were so kind to me I dared to dream——"

"Ah, heaven—how long ago it seems!"

"Yes, long enough, and fearful things have happened in between. But Francine——"

"Ah, let us rest, my Lord. Soon if you think of trying to explore the place we shall have toilsome work enough to do."

She led him to a couch and seated there looked up at him. "Do you know, I feel so weary and so old, so very old."

He regarded her with tender pity, but a little of reproach was in his eyes. "Too weary to remember, dear?" he asked. "I have been trying to speak to you of something that might have been, that yet perhaps might be."

"Ah, my Lord, what now matters anything?"

"Love, Francine."

She sighed profoundly, and shook her head. "I loved you once, I think, perhaps I love you still, out I am miserable. Oh, my poor old father! Ah, to think he is so ill, he that loved me so, and I away from him." With a sudden gasping cry she threw herself forward on the couch and great heart-breaking sobs shook her slender body violently. Cressingham watched her in silence, tears trickling down his own cheeks. His heart ached to soothe her, to help her in her great grief, but he dared not touch her, he felt himself somehow too unworthy and the girl too sacred. But soon she grew more composed and controlling herself looked sadly up at him. "What, do men weep?" she asked, a mournful smile parting her quivering lips.

He nodded, and answered huskily, "When they see the one they love in pain, men sometimes weep."

"Ah," she sighed, "you love me, Frank?"

"Yes, dear," he said simply.

"Sit down beside me." He obeyed.

"Francine, soon it will be daylight."

"Frank, my heart is breaking; in a few hours you will die."

"Dear, you love me then? Ah, say you love me, Francine!" He bent towards her, his arms outstetched, and the girl went to him slowly, with parted lips and brilliant eyes that shone with unshed tears.

HE GAVE A SHARP SCREAM AND TOPPLING OVERBOARD DISAPPEARED BENEATH THE WATER

"Kiss me, Francine!" Their lips met in a long feverish caress, and slowly the color mounted to the girl's wan cheeks. The man gathered her in close embrace and held her tightly to him, not satisfied until she rested on his knees and her head reclined upon his shoulder. And she, a little comforted, looked up at him and whispered: "I have so longed to be your wife, Frank. I have always loved you, dear! Ever since I have known you!"

"Darling!" he muttered, and kissed her passionately again.

She smiled. "I never intended to let that woman have you, Frank; I wanted you too much."

"I never really loved her!" he muttered.

"Ah! I am glad of that—but even if you had, I must have loved you all the same. I don't think I'm a very good girl, Frank. Even when I thought she was your mistress I still wanted you. Do you hate me for saying these things? But I may speak now without restraint, mayn't I, since we are so soon to lose each other?"

"Sweetheart, let us hope a little still."

"I cannot, Frank; but hold me to you—kiss me often; when you kiss me, for a second I forget to think, and am almost happy.

For a long while they reclined in silence folded in sweet companionship, moveless and speechless. They watched the dawn creep into the room, at first a pallid spectre that sought to strangle unawares the lamp's hard light and scarce succeeded, later a rosy sprite that peeped in at the windows to mock the man-made glare with the contrast of her dainty blushing beauty. The lovers saw each other soon by day, and each received a little shock, for the face of either was haggard beyond belief and eloquent of misery.

"Frank,' said the girl, breaking at last the long silence; "pure love is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear, it is beautiful."

"I would gladly give up my life to save yours, Frank."

"Need I tell you, darling, that my feelings are the same?"

"No, I know. We belong to each other now, do we not? Soul and body, Frank?"

"Soul and body, dear."

"You will not now refuse to take me with you when the time comes?" she muttered tremulously. "Ah, Frank, promise me. If you die I shall kill myself. I lied when I said I hadn't the courage, for I have; but ah, dear, it would be sweeter far to die by your hand. Listen, dear, you said that I am in no peril. You are wrong; I am. I already guess what my fate shall be, for that terrible man has hinted things, and sneered so often in the one direction that I am almost sure. He intends to sell me to some hateful friend of his, a Turk, I think, for he is expecting a visit from a Turk."

"My God!" cried Cressingham, "he would never dare?"

"Ah, Frank, what would he not dare? In pity promise me, dear love."

Cressingham kissed her on the lips. "Darling, if an hour before noon I find all hope gone it shall be as you wish, we shall die together."

The girl arose, and took from the bosom of her dress a small but vicious looking dagger, jewel hilted, which she gave to her lover. "I stole it from the Count's own room," she said, "the very first night that I arrived here. Let it be with this!"

He nodded, and concealed the blade about him, and presently Francine slipped from the room to change her gown. When she had gone Cressingham paced the room awhile, then, practical man that he was, crammed both his pockets with eatables from the uncleared table. Miss Elliott returned very soon wrapped in a long, grey cloak, and was his guide from the chateau.

Guards there were none, the doors were all on latch, and no living soul appeared to be on watch. The girl led the way behind the house to where a flight of stone steps, similar to those he had climbed with Madame the previous night, stretched winding upwards to the mountain top. Up these they toiled, and in half an hour had gained the summit, where a splendid view extended on all sides for a vast distance.

Cressingham saw at a glance how small was the island on which they rested. It lay like a gleaming green jewel in a sapphire sea, for save for a few small clearings its mountainous sides were covered with dense thickets of olive-tinted shrubs. Looking sheer down the steps he marked how cunningly the house was perched.

The yacht which had carried him from Naples had completely vanished, and not a sail was in sight.

He noticed about half a mile from the chateau, a small stone boathouse that, defended by a coping of high rocks, seemed to run a little distance from the land, for the waves lapped at its sides with curling tongues of spray. Straining his eyes seawards, he espied, a dozen miles northeast, the outline of another island which seemed, as near as he could judge, of more important size than Attala.

Cressingham pointed to the boat-house. "What is kept there, Francine?"

"I am not sure, Frank, for no one is allowed in there except Desire, the Count's grandson, who has always been my mentor and companion (he is only a boy, Frank). Desire told me as a secret that his grandfather, the Count, uses it as a workshop, and spends a great deal of time there on a boat which he is building of steel and aluminum. This, it seems, is the old man's single hobby."

"Ha, I should like to see the inside of that boat-house, Francine!"

"No use, dear. I have tried, but it is built of solid stone, and its one door, which is of plated steel, is always locked. Desire even dared not take me there."

The lovers spent two hours on the look-out hand in hand, Cressingham always gazing seawards, racking his brains for an idea, some plan which might offer a tiny chance to win him his desires. But no hope came to cheer him. Every chance of escape was inevitably removed, and despair, a grim visaged spectre, came at last, and stared him in the face. A brave man, he fought the phantom off, and assuming an aspect of cheerfulness which almost deceived the girl, invited her to sit upon the steps and share his breakfast.

"Is it possible that you can eat?" she asked sadly.

He forced a laugh. "Must, my sweetheart. I never could think properly on an empty stomach. Come along, darling, we'll have to clear out of this soon, you know, and it's a pretty fairish journey we'll be taking."

"A long journey, indeed!" sighed the girl; "a journey from which there will be no returning!"

"Well, who wants to come back here, anyway?" demanded Cressingham, forcing himself to seem light-hearted. The girl sat down beside him and watched him eat with wide but tender eyes.

"You cannot deceive me, Frank," she muttered presently; "you are forcing yourself."

"Not I," he cried. "Come, come, sweetheart, it's barely eight o'clock; we have four hours yet. By jove, who is that?"

The girl followed his gesture, and saw wandering along the beach the graceful figure of a lad, who carried a bundle slung across his shoulders.

"It's Desire going to the boat-house," she replied.

They watched the boy lightly climb some boulders, then arriving at the boat-house open the door, enter and disappear, the door closing behind him.

"He must need light to work by," objected Cressingham; "perhaps the building opens on the bay."

"No, dear; it can open there, I think, for there is a big iron door, but it dips right into the water, and is always closed; he works by electricity, I think."

"What sort of a lad is this Desire?"

"A real sweet boy," said Francine. "He hates this island bitterly. He has always been shut up here. He is very clever, I think; he knows all about science and electricity, and that sort of thing. I have heard him argue with the Count—who is a very learned man, Frank, to do him justice—but each time Desire held his own. Desire works early and date in that boat-house, only coming out for his health's sake, for his grandfather has promised him, if the boat is a success, that he shall go to some university in England."

"I see; but is not the lad mixed up with the Nihilists?"

"Yes and no; he is, of course, a Nihilist, he had to be, but he loathes them in his heart."

"Francine, this boy might help us if we could get to him."

"Ah, dear, he is only a lad! What could he do?"

"He might give us a key to unlock one of those boats. Only think of it, Francine. See! my God, one of the boats is fitted up with oars and sails. There is not a living soul on the beach or near it. Great heaven, let us go at once! If we could steal away now, we should get a good start and with a wind! Francine, was I not right to eat? Please God, I'll get you safe off yet."

The girl's eyes had taken a sudden light of hope reflected perhaps from his, for the man was near frantic with excitement. Joining hands, they commenced the descent like a pair of eager children, but had not proceeded twenty yards before a turn of the winding steps brought them to a little platform and face to face with Madame Katherin Vivella.

"Stop!" she commanded. "I have come in search of you."

"For what purpose?" he demanded roughly, for on sight of her every bad feeling in his heart had mounted uppermost and it was in his mind to kill her, since she might bar the slender chance of their escape.

Madame held up a large key. "My father sleeps at last," she said, "and I have procured this key. The servants are now at breakfast. You must slip down speedily to the beach and with this key unlock one of the boats. You should get an hour's start at least. More I cannot do for you, Frank; I have risked my life in doing this much. Go, dear, go!"

"Kate, you have done this for me!"

"To save your life!" said Madame wearily; "I could not bear to see you die. All I ask in return is that you should think kindly of me sometimes."

"You know all my escape must mean?"

The woman smiled. "You are foolish, Frank. The Chief of the Nihilists will never be taken; if you escape, he will abandon this retreat, that is all."

"Ah, I see. Well, Kate, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Good-bye." He held out his hand, but Madame looked at him reproachfully, and without a word he took her in his arms and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Farewell!" he said. "Come, Francine!" But Miss Elliott stared at him, turned of a sudden cold as stone. "Do you think I would owe my life to that woman, my father's murderess? You are mad, or dream, my Lord."

Cressingham groaned on seeing this new difficulty in his path, but Madame, with a strange smile, swung on her heel and walked off with these words: "Delay will be fatal, Frank. Soon the beach will be alive with negroes who are going fishing out to sea. Their boat is now awaiting you. If you are wise, haste and take it. Farewell!"

"Francine!" said the man hoarsely, "you see before you a chance to save two lives, yours and mine. What matter whence comes this chance? It is ours, let us take it."

"You go, my Lord," said Francine icily. "I shall stay."

"You know I shall not go without you," he cried.

"I beg your pardon, I know nothing now."

Cressingham threw himself on his knees before her. "Francine, I know I am not worthy of you. I never was, but on my honor, darling, I love only you. I kissed that woman just as I would have kissed one of those cursed negroes if he had brought me a means of winning you from here."

"You kissed her!"

"I did. Hate me, cast me off if you will, dear, but let me save you."

"Or yourself!" The words were stinging as a whip lash. Cressingham got slowly to his feet and looked at her; when next he spoke his voice was calm and low. "You do me an injustice, dear; but have it as you will. My death at least will prove I am not all the cad you think me." He seated himself on the steps and buried his face in his hands.

Precious minutes passed slowly one by one, but he was hopeless now, and did not feel so keenly as he had felt before. It came to him as a real surprise when at last a trembling hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a faltering voice whispered in his ear, "I was so jealous, Frank!"

Starting to his feet he seized the girl, his eyes agleam again with hope.

"Francine!" he cried, and strained her to him, but she pushed herself away. "First wipe your lips," she muttered. "I could not let you kiss me after her!"

Next moment they were speeding seawards down the steps.

CHAPTER XIV

A DREAM OF HOPE.

THE adventurers arrived at the beach at last, and apparently without having been observed. Cressingham cast an anxious glance behind him as they reached the boats, but no one could he see nor any sign of life. With trembling fingers he unlocked the padlock of the boat that was already equipped, and drew it swiftly towards them from the sea.

It was then that they heard a loud mocking laugh, and turning saw the figure of the Count d'Attala supported on the arms of his slaves, and accompanied by half a score of negroes, issue from a tunnel in the rock some fifty yards away.

But Cressingham was desperate. Seizing Francine in his arms he threw her in the boat, and springing aboard himself, caught up the oars and fitted them into their rowlocks. He saw that some of the negroes carried sculls upon their shoulders, and that all were armed, but with a muttered cry to providence, he refused to let himself think, and bent all his energies for a mad race with death.

Miss Elilott crouched down in the stern and covered her face with her hands, for she could only see one upshot of the struggle, and had abandoned herself to despair.

Cressingham heard the Count give a stern order: "No, do not shoot! After them; take them alive."

"It's all up with us, Francine," he muttered hoarsely.

"The time has come to keep your promise, Frank," she cried.

He got to his feet, too, and glanced despairingly about him, as though taking a last look at the bright world before departing on that unknown voyage from which there can be no return.

The negroes were backing water and slowly approaching him, still eighty yards distant. His own boat lay idle on the water immediately opposite the portcullised mouth of the stone boat-house of the Count d'Attala.

The boy Desire stood upon the beach outside the door gazing at them intently, while two hundred paces to the right the Count himself sat on a rock smoking a cigarette and waiting unconcernedly for his prisoners to be brought back to him.

Suddenly Cressingham gave a start. "We have one hope left!' he cried.

"What is it, dear?"

"The boat-house. I must leave you, dear. It is a chance and a desperate one, but it may save us yet. See, darling, the sea door of the boat-house only just dips into the sea. I shall pretend to stab myself, and then jump overboard. Then I shall dive, and swimming under water, try and reach the boat-house door, under which I shall swim, and afterwards throw myself upon Desire's mercy. If he is the lad you think, he will help us; who knows? Shall I chance it, dear?"

"Yes, Frank, go, and God be with you. If there is a God, He will surely help you!"

"Then kiss me, dear."

They embraced, and then, in full view of all the watchers, Cressingham tok the dagger from his pocket, brandished it before the eyes of his pursuers, and to all seeming plunged it deep into his heart. He gave a sharp scream, and toppling overboard, disappeared instantly beneath the surface of the waters. Miss Elliott uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself at full length in the bottom of the boat. The negroes, with fierce guttural cries, propelled their own boat swiftly forward.

To Be Continued Next Sunday