

THE FATE OF A CROWN (Continued from Page Three)

But de Pintra merely shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. Such a person could do little to imperil the cause, for its important secrets could not be surprised. The grim vault guarded them well. My duties occupying me only at night, my days were wholly his own, and they passed very pleasantly indeed. For my acquaintance with Lesba Paola had ripened into a close friendship between us—a friendship in which she was not only a friend, but a confidante. Eager to resolve into a closer relation, but Lesba although frank and ingenuous in all her intercourse, had an effectual way of preventing the declarations of love which were ever on my tongue, and I found it extremely difficult to lead our conversation into channels that would open my heart to her. She was an expert horsewoman, and took many long rides together, during which she pointed out to me the neighborhoods of all the grandees in the republic, and Dom Miguel, whose love for the beautiful girl was very evident, seemed to encourage our companionship, and often spoke of her with great tenderness. He would dwell with special pride upon the aristocratic breeding of his ward, which, he said, was valued more for its effect upon other noble families than for any special advantage it lent to Lesba. I was while Dom Miguel was thoroughly republican in every sense of the word, and interesting the best families of Brazil in the fortunes of his beloved Cause, and one by one he was cleverly succeeding in winning them. My familiarity with the records taught me that the Revolution was being backed by the flower of Brazilian nobility—the most positive assurance in my eyes of the justice and timeliness of the great movement for liberty. The idea that monarchs derive their authority from divine sources—so prevalent amongst the higher classes—had dissolved before the object lessons arguments of the corrupt ministry constantly afforded. All thoughtful people had come to a realization that liberty was but a step from darkness to light, a bursting of the gates which had oppressed them since the day that Portugal had declared the province of Brazil an Empire, and set a scion of her royal family to rule its people with autocratic sway. And Lesba, sprung from the bluest blood in all the land, had great influence in awakening, in those families she visited, an earnest desire for a republic. Her passionate appeals were constantly inspiring her fellows with an enthusiastic devotion to the cause of liberty, and she was duly appreciated by Dom Miguel, whose admiration for the girl's simple but direct methods of making converts was unbounded. "Lesba is a rebel to her very fingertips," said he, "and her longing to see her country as a public exceeded by that of no man among us. But we are chary of admitting women to our councils, so my little girl must be content to watch for the great day when the cause of freedom shall prevail." However, she constantly surprised me by her intimate knowledge of our progress. As we were riding one day she asked: "Were you not impressed by your visit to the secret vault?" "The secret vault?" I exclaimed. "Do you know of it?" "I can explain every inch of its construction," she returned, with a laugh; "everything, indeed, save the secret by means of which one may gain admission. Was it not Francisco's idea? And he, certainly, is a clever fellow." "It was built by foreign workmen, brought to Brazil secretly, and for that purpose. Afterward the artificers were sent home again; and not one of them, I believe, could again find his way to my uncle's house, for every precaution was taken to prevent their discovering its location." "That was well done," said I. "All that Francisco undertakes is well done," she answered simply. "This faith in her perplexing brother was so perfect that I never ventured to oppose it. We could not have remained friends had I questioned either his truth or ability." Madam Isabel I saw but seldom, as she avoided the society of the family and preferred the seclusion of her own apartments. On the rare occasions of our meetings she treated me with a frigid courtesy, resenting any attempt upon my part to draw her into conversation. For a time it grieved me that Dom Miguel's daughter should regard me with so much obvious dislike and suspicion. Her sad story had impressed me greatly, and I could understand how her proud nature had resented the slanders of Francisco Paola, and written under them. But one evening when with Madam Isabel's content me with Madam Isabel's aversion, and led the chief to suspect that she was guilty as I had deemed him. It was late, and Dom Miguel had preceded me to the domed chamber while I carried the records and papers to be deposited within the vault. After raising the first trap my employer, as usual, extinguished the candle. I heard the customary low grating noise, but before the shooting of the bolts reached my ears there was a sharp report, followed by a heavy thud, and turning instantly I beheld Madam Isabel standing beside us, holding in her hand a lighted match and peering eagerly at the surface of the trap. My eyes followed hers, and while Dom Miguel stood as if petrified with amazement, I saw the glitter of a gold ring protruding from one of the many curious indentations upon the plate. The next instant the match was dashed from her grasp and she gave a low cry of pain. "Light the candle!" commanded de Pintra's voice, fiercely. I obeyed. He was holding the woman fast by her wrist. The ring had disappeared, and the mystery of the trap seemed as inscrutable as ever. Dom Miguel, greatly excited and muttering imprecations all the way, dragged his daughter through the passage and up the stairs. I followed them, silently, to the chief's study. Then, casting the woman from him, de Pintra confronted her with blazing eyes, and demanded: "How dare you spy upon me?" Madam Isabel had become cool as her father grew excited. She actually smiled—a hard, bitter smile—as she defiantly looked into his face and answered: "Spy? You forget, sir, that I am your daughter. I cannot see your room to do you wrong here; but the door to this stairway was displaced, and a cold air came through it. Fearing that some danger menaced you I passed down the stairs, until, hearing a noise

I passed to strike a match. You can best explain the contretemps." Long and silently Dom Miguel gazed upon his daughter. Then he said, abruptly, "Leave the room!" She obeyed coldly, with a mocking expression in her dark eyes, and withdrew. As she passed me I noted upon her cheeks an unwonted blush that rendered her strikingly beautiful. Deep in thought de Pintra paced the floor with nervous strides. Finally he turned toward me. "What did you see?" he asked, sharply. "A ring," I answered. "It lay upon the trap, and the stone was fitted into one of the numerous indentations." "He passed his hand over his brow with a gesture of despair." "Then she saw it also, he murmured, "and my secret is a secret no longer." I remained silent, looking upon him curiously, but in deep sympathy. Suddenly he held out an emerald ring, the little finger to be of no exception, the value, indeed, the trinket was calculated to attract so little attention that I had barely noticed it before, although I remembered that my employer always wore it. "This," said he, abruptly, "is the key to the vault." I nodded, the truth had flashed upon me the moment Madam Isabel had struck the match. And now, looking at it closely, I saw that the face was oddly cut, although the face was not likely to impress one who was ignorant of the purpose for which it was made. The chief resumed his pacing, but presently paused to say: "If anything happens to me, my friend, be sure to secure this ring above all else. Get it to Paola, or to Fonseca, or Piexoto as soon as possible—you know where they may be found. Should it fall into the hands of the royalists the result would be fatal." "There are two hundred indentations in the door of the trap," answered de Pintra, "and the stone of the ring is so cut that it fits but one of them. To test each cavity, they are sure to find the right one, and then the stone of my ring acts as a key. My real hope that no one would discover that my ring unlocked the vault. Now that Isabel has learned the truth I must guard the ring as I would my life—more, the lives of all our patriotic band." "Since you suspect her loyalty, why do you not send your daughter away?" I suggested. "I prefer to keep her under my own eye. And, strange as her actions of to-night seem, I still hesitate to believe that my own child would conspire to ruin me." "The secret is not your own, sir," I ventured to say. "True," he acknowledged, flushing deeply, "the secret is not my own, it belongs to the Cause. And its discovery would jeopardize the revolution itself. For this reason I shall keep Isabel with me, where, admitting she has the inclination to betray us, she will not have the power." After this night he did not extinguish the light when we entered the vault, but he took pains to secure the trap in the study floor so that no one could follow us. After watching him apply the key several times I became confident that I could try to unlock the vault unaided. Days passed by, and Madam Isabel remained as quiet and reserved as if she had indeed abandoned any further curiosity concerning the secret vault. As for my fellow-rebel, the Senhorita Lesba, I rode and chatted with her in the firm conviction that her least, was one secret connected with the revolution of which she was ignorant.

CHAPTER VIII. One evening, as I entered Dom Miguel's library, I found myself face to face with a strange visitor. He did not wear a mask, as did so many of the conspirators, even in the chief's presence; but a long black cloak swept in many folds from his neck to his feet. My first thought was considerably above his size, for he was tall and finely proportioned, so that his presence fairly dominated us and made the furnishings of the room in which he stood seem small and insignificant. As I entered, he stood with his back to the fireplace confronting Dom Miguel, whose face wore a sad and tired expression. I immediately turned to withdraw, but a gesture from the stranger arrested me. "Robert," said Dom Miguel, "I propose you to General Manuel Deodoro da Fonseca." I bowed profoundly. General Fonseca was not only a commander of the Emperor's royal army, but Chief Marshal of the forces of the Revolutionary party. He had never seen the great man before, as his duties required his constant presence at the capital; but no figure loomed larger than his in the affairs of the conspiracy. Seldom have I met a keener or more disconcerting glance than that which shot from his full black eyes as I stood before him. It seemed to search out my every thought, and I had the sensation of being before a judge who would show no mercy to one who strove to dissemble in his presence. But the glance was brief, withal. In a moment he had seized my hand and gripped it painfully. Then he turned to Dom Miguel. "Let me hear the rest of your story," said he. "There is nothing more, General. Isabel has learned my secret, it is true; but she is my daughter. I will vouch for her faith." "Then will not it?" returned Fonseca, in his deep, vibrant tones. "Never have I believed the tale of her estrangement from that scoundrel, Leon de Mar. Men are seldom traitors, for they dare not face the consequences. Women have no fear of man or devil. They are daughters of Delilah—each and every one." He turned suddenly to me. "Will you also vouch for Senhora Isabel de Mar?" he asked. "No," I answered. "And quite right, sir," he returned, with a grim smile. "Never trust a woman in politics. But how about Francisco Paola? Do you vouch for him?" I hesitated, startled by the question. "Answer me!" he commanded. "I cannot see that I am required to vouch for any one, General," said I, nettled by his manner. "I am here to serve the Cause, not to judge the loyalty of its leaders." "Ugh!" said he, contemptuously;

and I turned my back upon him, facing Dom Miguel, over whose features a fleeting smile passed. Fonseca stalked up and down the apartment, his sword clanking beneath his cloak, and his spurs clicking like castanets. Then he planted his huge figure before the chief. "Watch them both," said he brusquely; "your daughter and your friend. They are aware of our most important secrets." De Pintra's face reddened. "Francisco is true as steel," he retorted, firmly. "Not one of us—including yourself, General—has done more to serve the Cause. I have learned to depend upon his discretion as I would upon my own—or yours." The general frowned, and drew a folded paper from his breast pocket. "Read that," said he, tossing it into Dom Miguel's hand. "It is a copy of the report made by Paola to the Emperor this morning." De Pintra glanced at the paper and then gave it to me at the same time dropping his head in his hands. I read the report. It stated that the Minister of Police had discovered the existence of a secret vault constructed beneath the mansion of Miguel de Pintra, the rebel chief. This vault, the police thought, contained important records of the conspiracy. It was built of double plates of steel, and the entrance was guarded by a cleverly constructed door, which could only be unlocked by means of a stone set in a ring which was constantly in the possession of Miguel de Pintra. The minister made a request for possession of the ring, when the rebels would be at the Emperor's mercy. "Well, sir, what do you think of Francisco Paola now?" inquired Fonseca, with a significant smile. "He did not himself invent the secret vault," I asked. "How long ago?" "A matter of two years. Is it not so, Dom Miguel?" "And until now Paola has kept this secret?" I continued. "Until now, yes!" said the general. "Until the vault was stored with all our funds and the complete records of the revolution." "Then it seems clear to me that Paola, as Minister of Police, has been driven to make this report in order to serve the Cause?" Dom Miguel looked up at me quickly, and the huge general snorted and stabbed me with his terrible eyes. "What do you mean?" demanded Fonseca. "This report proves, I fear, that our suspicions of Madam Isabel are well founded," said Dom Miguel. "Dom Miguel while I doubtless discovered the vault and its mysterious contents, he has not yet revealed the Emperor or his way to him. Therefore he has forestalled Madam Isabel's report, in order that he may prove his department vigilant in serving the government, and so protect his high office. Can you not see that Paola's report is a working to set us? Really, he knows that he could obtain it by arresting Dom Miguel. But this report will prevent the Emperor putting his man Valcour upon the case, which he would probably have done had he received his first information from Isabel de Mar." For a moment there was silence. Then the general's brow unbent and he said with cheerfulness: "This explanation is entirely reasonable. It would not do for Paola to get himself exposed, or even suspected, at this juncture. A new Minister of Police would redouble our danger." "How did you obtain this copy of the report?" asked de Pintra. "From one of my spies." "I have no doubt," said I, "that Paola was instrumental in sending it to you. It is a warning, gentlemen. We must not delay in acting upon it, and removing our treasure and our records to a safer place." "And where is that?" asked Fonseca. I looked at the chief. He sat thoughtfully considering the matter. "There is no need of immediate haste," said he presently, "and nothing can be done to-night, in any event. Tomorrow we will pack everything in chests and carry them to Senhor Basto, who has a safe hiding-place. Meanwhile, concerning the report, you men to serve as escort. How many are there?" "Three. They are now guarding the usual approaches to this house." "Let them ride with you to the station at Cruz, and send them back to me in the morning. I will also summon some of our nearby patriots. By noon to-morrow everything will be ready for the transfer." "Very good!" ejaculated the general. "We cannot abandon too soon the vault we constructed with so much care. Where is your daughter?" "In her apartments." "Before you leave to-morrow, look her up and put a guard at her door. We must not let her suspect the removal of the records." "It shall be done," answered de Pintra, with a sigh. "It may be," he continued, hesitatingly, "that my confidence in Isabel has been misplaced. The general did not reply. He folded his cloak about him, glanced at the clock, and strode from the room without a word of farewell. When he had gone Dom Miguel turned to me. "Well!" said he.

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"Come quick, for God's sake!"

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