

The Fate of a Crown

...BY... SCHUYLER STAUNTON

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(Continued from last week)

"Are you mad?" I asked, with well-remembered contempt.

"No; but the Mexican is. I have just left his room, and he raves perpetually of a ring he has given to Robert Harcliffe, of New Orleans. A ring that must be restored to him on demand."

"He raves," said I, coolly, although my heart was beating wildly.

"He does, indeed," acknowledged Paola. "And he tells exactly where the ring was placed—in the outer pocket of your jacket. Will you pardon me, senator, if I prove the truth of his assertion?"

He rose and advanced to me with a soft, stealthy tread, and I backed away until I stood fairly against the wall, vainly endeavoring to find some way to circumvent him.

"I have a clear voice, and as Paola swung around upon his heel I saw beyond him the form of Valcour outlined by the dark doorway.

"You were doubtless about to search the prisoner, senator," said the spy, calmly, as he approached us. "I have



"Good God! the vault is empty."

myself just come from the Mexican's room and heard his ravings. But the task must be mine, since the Emperor has placed the search for the key in my hands."

Paola turned with a slight shrug and resumed his seat.

"I have searched the prisoner already," he announced, "but failed to find the ring. Doubtless he has passed it to Plectox, or secreted it. Or, it may be, the Mexican's words are mere ravings."

The detective hesitated.

"Who is this Mexican, Senator Paola?" he asked.

"Frankly, I do not know. Not a conspirator, I am sure, and evidently not a royalist."

"Then how came he to know of the existence of the ring?"

"A mystery, my dear Valcour. Have you yet identified the man this Mexican murdered?"

"Not yet."

"I myself have not had a good look at the body. If you will take me to him I will endeavor to locate the fellow. It was my mischance he who murdered Madame Isabel."

As he spoke he rose and walked quietly toward the door, as if he expected Valcour to follow. But the spy, suddenly suspicious, cast a shrewd glance at me and replied:

"One moment, Senator Paola. I must satisfy myself that neither Harcliffe nor Plectox has the ring. In order that I may report to the Emperor."

"As you like," returned the Minister, indifferently, and resumed his chair.

Valcour came straight to my side, thrust his hand within my pocket, and drew out the ring.

"Ah!" he cried, his face lighting with joy. "Your search must have been a careless one, my dear Paola! Here is news for the Emperor, at last!"

He hurried from the room, and Paola, still smiling, rose and faced us.

"It is a great pity," said he, pleasantly, "that you should find that God permits any man to be a fool."

Before I could reply he had followed Valcour from the room, and Plectox, regarding me with a sullen frown, exclaimed:

"I can say amen to that! Why did you not tell me you had the ring?"

I did not reply. The taunts and the loss of the ring had dazed me and I sank into a chair and covered my eyes with my hands.

Pacing the room with furious energy, Plectox growled a string of lamentations and reproaches into my unwilling ears.

"My poor comrades! It is their death-warrant. These records will condemn to punishment half the great families of Brazil. And now when the battle is almost won, to have them fall into the Emperor's hands. Thank God, de Pintra is dead! This blow would be worse to him than death itself."

"However," said I, somewhat recovering myself, "we shall now secure his body from that grim vault. That is one satisfaction, at least."

He did not seem to reply to this, but paced the floor in as great agitation as before.

Captain de Souza entered with two of his guards.

"The Emperor commands you to unlock the vault," he said to me. "Be good enough to follow, senator. And Senator Plectox is also requested to be present."

"Tell the Emperor I refuse to unlock the vault," I returned firmly.

"And why?" demanded Plectox, scornfully. "It is merely a question of time, now that they have the key, when they will find the right indentation in the door."

"Yes, I designed it," said the Minister, "but I did not execute the work. Doubtless some time I could open the door; but the Emperor is impatient."

I saw that further resistance was useless. Bending over, I fitted the stone of the ring into the proper indentation, and shot the bolts. The great door was swung upward, a whirl of the damp, confined air entered my nostrils and made me shiver.

Reaching my hand within the vault I turned the switch that threw on the electric light, and then withdrew that the others might enter.

But no one moved. The light illuminated the full interior of the great vault, and every eye gazed eagerly within.

Valcour uttered a groan of baffled rage. Plectox swore overcoarsely, a scarcely audible tone, and the Minister of Police laughed.

"Good God!" cried the Emperor, with staring eyeballs, "the vault is empty!"

CHAPTER XVII.

With a bound I stood within the grim vault and searched its confines with anxious eyes. True enough, the place was empty. Not a scrap of paper, a book, or a bank-note had been left there. The shelves that lined the walls were as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard.

The records of the Revolution were gone. The body of Miguel de Pintra was gone. Thank God, the great and glorious Cause was as yet safe!

Valcour was on his hands and knees, probing into the corners for some scrap that might have been overlooked.

Paola stood beside me with the old aggravating simper upon his face, twirling one end of his moustache.

Suddenly Valcour stood up and faced him.

"Traitor!" he cried, with a passionate gesture, "it is you who have done this! It is you who have led us here only to humiliate us and laugh at us!"

"Your Majesty," said Paola, without moving his kindly face, "kindly protect me from the insults of your servants."

"Have peace, Valcour!" growled the Emperor. "Senator Francisco has proved his loyalty, and doubtless shares our chagrin. Come, gentlemen, let us leave this dismal place."

I followed slowly in the train of the party as it wound its way through the narrow passages and up the iron stairs into the library. My handcuffs had been removed when I was brought to open the vault, and an idea came to me to tag behind and try to effect my escape from the house.

But Valcour was waiting for me at the trap door, and called Captain de Souza to guard me. I was taken to the large room on the ground floor, from whence they had brought me, thrust through the doorway, and the key returned upon me.

Plectox had been taken elsewhere, and I found myself alone.

My thoughts were naturally confused by the amazing discovery we had just made, and I was so engaged in wondering what had become of Dom Miguel and the records that I scarcely looked up when the door opened to admit Francisco Paola.

He had in his hand a small parcel that looked like a box, which he placed upon a table near the open window.

Next he drew a note-book from his pocket, scribbled some lines upon three several leaves, and then, tearing them out, he reached within the box, taking care to lift but a portion of the cover, and busied himself some moments in a way that made me wonder what he could be doing. I had no suspicion of the truth until he carried the box to the window and quickly removed the cover. Then, although his back was toward me, I heard a rapid flutter of wings, followed by a strange silence, and I knew that Paola was following with his eyes the flight of the birds he had liberated.

"So, my dear Minister, I have at last discovered your secret!" said a sharp voice, and as Paola whirled about I noted that Valcour had entered the room and was standing with folded arms and eyes that sparkled triumphantly.

"Orders to my men," remarked the Minister, quietly, and brushed a small feather from his arm.

"True enough," returned Valcour, with a bitter smile. "Orders to General Fonseca, whom you strangely overlooked in making your decoy arrests. Orders to Sanchez Bastro, who is to distribute arms to the rebels! And where did the third pigeon go, my loyal and conscientious Minister of Police? To Mazanovitch, or to what Miguel de Pintra whom you falsely led us to believe had perished in your vault?"

He came close to the Minister.

"Traitor! In setting free these birds you have fired the torch of rebellion; that terrible flame which is liable to

CHAPTER XVIII.

The man did not seem to notice my presence at first. For a time he remained motionless in the prison, the guards had left him, his vacant eye fixed steadily upon the opposite wall.

Then, with a long-drawn sigh, his gaze fell and wandered to the table where stood the remains of my luncheon. With a wolf-like avidity he pounced upon the tray, eagerly consuming every scrap that I had left, and draining a small bottle of wine of the last dregs it contained.

When he had finished he still continued to fumble about the tray, and presently picked up a large, two-tined steel fork and examined it with careful attention. They had brought no knife into the room, and I had scarcely noticed the fork before, yet now it struck the Mexican held it firmly in his clenched fist, and passed it to and fro with a serpent-like motion. I realized with a thrill of anxiety that it might prove a terrible weapon in the hands of a desperate man.

Evidently my fellow-prisoner had the same thought, for after a time he concealed the fork in his bosom, and then turned to examine the room more carefully. His first act was to approach the window, and when he started and shrank I knew our ever-vigilant guard

"Traitor! In setting free these birds you sweep the land, and consume royalist and republican alike!"

Paola, the sneering smile for once gone from his face, gazed at his accuser with evident admiration.

"You are wonderfully clever, my dear Valcour," said he slowly. "You have wit, you have a clear judgment; your equal is not in all Brazil. What a pity, my friend, that you are not one of us!"

Somehow, the words seemed to ring true. Valcour flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I hate you," he cried, stamping his foot with passion. "You have thwarted me always. You have laughed at me—insulted at me—defied me! But at last I have you in the toils. Francisco Paola, I arrest you in the name of the Emperor!"

"On what charge?"

"The charge of treason!"

Paola laughed softly, and in a tone denoting genuine amusement.

"Come, my brave detective," said he; "we will go to the Emperor together, and accuse each other to our hearts' content!"

He attempted to take Valcour's arm, in his inimicable jaunty fashion; but the spy shook him off and followed Paola from the room, trembling with suppressed rage.

For my part, I knew not what to make of the scene, except that these men were bitter enemies, and each endeavoring to destroy the other. But could Valcour's accusation be true? Had the torch of revolution really been fired?

God forbid that I should ever meet with such another man as Francisco Paola! A deep or shallow, coxcomb or clever conspirator, true man or traitor—it was as impossible to read him or to judge his real character as to solve the mighty, unfathomable secrets of Nature.

One moment I called him traitor; the next I was sure he was faithful to the Cause. But who could judge the man aright? Not I, indeed!

Thus reflecting, I approached the window and looked out. Eight feet below me one of the Uruguayan soldiers paced back and forth upon the green lawn, his short carbine underneath his arm, and a poniard swinging at his side.

The fellow looked up and saw me. "Close that window!" he commanded, with a scowl.

I obeyed, sliding the sash to its place. But still I gazed through the blinds, and hegedes defining the extended garden at this side of the house. I knew every inch of these grounds, having wandered there many hours during my sojourn at the mansion. And the thought came into my mind that it would be difficult to escape in that maze of hedge and shrubbery, had I once a fair start of my pursuers.

Within my range of vision was a portion of the wall, and with good reason I saw the Emperor's carriage roll away, followed by several others. Plectox was seated in the list of the carriages, but only a small portion of the Uruguayan guard accompanied the cortege.

I tried to see if the Minister of Police was among those who were returning to Rio, but was unable to note his presence in the brief time the carriages were in view. Valcour, however, seem to be with them. Captain de Souza evidently remained in charge of the guards left at the mansion.

Well, I longed to leave the place myself, and with good reason. A secret vault had been discovered, for some reason my captors desired me to remain a prisoner.

The day dragged wearily away. One of the Uruguayans brought me food at noontime, and I ate with good appetite. The room grew close, but when I attempted to raise the window the surly guard outside presented his carbine, and I respected his wish to leave the sash lowered.

During this time I had ample opportunity to speculate upon the astonishing events of the morning; but my attempt to solve the problem of what had become of Dom Miguel and the records seemed absolutely futile. The body of the chief had been removed by some friendly hand—the same that had saved the funds and papers—there was no doubt whatever. But when had this removal taken place?

At one time a fleeting hope animated me that the vault had been entered in time to save Dom Miguel from suffocation. A little reflection, however, caused me to abandon that idea.

Allowing that the slayer of Madame Isabel had been a patriot, and left the train at the first station beyond Cruz, he could not possibly have returned to the mansion on foot, and I could not believe that he would have walked the prongs quivered and came to rest.

"Am I not clever?" he again asked, drawing out the fork from the wood box, and holding it to his breast. But I do not know how I shall divide myself with me. But not half! I won all from Careno, but you shall have some—enough to be rich, senator Americano. And now, give me the ring!"

By this time his eyes were glittering with insanity, and at his abrupt demand I shifted uneasily in my seat, not knowing how to reply.

"Give me the ring!" he repeated, a tone of menace creeping into his high-pitched voice.

I arose and walked toward the window, getting the table between us. Then I turned and faced him.

"They have taken the ring from me," I said.

He stood as if turned to stone, his fierce eyes fixed upon my own.

"They have opened the vault with it," I continued, "and found it bare and empty."

I gave a shrill scream at this, and began trembling in every limb.

"You lie!" he shouted, wildly. "You try to cheat me—to get all! And the vault has millions—millions in gold and notes. Give me the ring!"

I made no reply. To reiterate my assertion would do no good, and the man was incompetent to consider the matter calmly. Indeed, he once more drew that ugly fork from his breast, and grasping it as one would a dagger, began creeping toward me with a stealthy, cat-like tread.

I approached the edge of the round center-table, alert to keep its breadth between me and my companion. The Mexican on his clinched teeth:

"Give it me! Give me the ring!"

"The guard will be here presently," said I, fervently hoping I spoke the truth, "and he will tell you of the ring. I am quite sure Senator Valcour has it."

"Ah, I am betrayed! You wish to take all—you and this Valcour! But see, my Americano—I will kill you. I will kill you now, and then you have nothing for your treachery!"

Slowly he edged his way around the table, menacing me with his strange weapon, and with my eyes fixed upon his I moved in the opposite direction, retaining the table as my shield.

First in one direction and then in the other he moved, swiftly at times, then with deliberate caution, striving ever to take me unawares and reach me with his improvised dagger.

This situation could not stand the tension for long. I realized that sooner or later the game must have an abrupt ending.

So, as I dodged my persistent enemy, I set my wits working to devise a means of escape. The window seemed my only hope, and I had lost all fear

had warned him not to consider that avenue of escape.

Next he swung around and faced the place where I sat slightly in the shadow. The day was drawing to its close, and he had not noticed me before. A swift motion toward his breast was followed by a smile, and he advanced close to me and said, in his stumbling English:

"Ah! My American friend to which I gave the ring? It is safe, senator? It is safe?"

I nodded, thinking to humor him. Indeed, I could not determine at that moment whether the man was still insane or not.

He drew a chair to my side and sat down.

"Listen, then, my friend. Together we will find riches—riches very great! Because we Mexicans—Careno and myself—we will find the door of the big vault under this house. We will bring us here blindfold. We work many days on the big plate with a sawge device cut in the steel. Careno and I expert. Only one place, cut with great cunning, we saw the bolt in their sockets. For myself, I am clockmaker and gem-cutter. They tell me to cut emerald so it fit the plate, and mount the ring. Yes, it is fine, I, Senator Americano, who do that fine work—I, Manuel Pesta!"

"Then they carry us away, blindfold again, to the border of Uruguay. We do not know this house—we cannot find it again ever. So they think. But we make sure they lead us to a sinuate us—to stab us to the heart in the Uruguayan Mountain. Fine pay for our work—eh, senator? But, peste! Careno and I stab our assassins—we escape—we escape—two years we wander in Brazil—seeking, ever seeking for the house with the vault."

"How clever they are! But we, are we not also clever? On a railway train one day we see a lady with the ring. We cannot mistake—I made it, and I know my work. It is key to the big vault! Careno cannot wait. He sits beside lady and put his knife in her hand. Ah, well, my pistol is quicker than his knife, that is all. He is wearing ring, and it stick like it stick on lady's hand. Bah! I cut off Careno's hand and carve away the ring. It is simple, is it not?"

"But now the soldiers gallop up. The house is full with people. So I must wait. I hide in secret place, but soon they drag me out make me prisoner. What! must I lose all now—millions—millions of gold and no Careno to share it? No, I am still clever. I keep ring in mouth until I meet you, and I give it to you to keep. When they search me, there is no ring."

He sprang up, chuckling and rubbing his hands together in great delight. He danced a step or two and then drew the steel fork from his breast and struck it fiercely into the ceiling, sitting steadily to me and while the prongs quivered and came to rest.

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The Dr. Unger Medicine Co., Ltd., Lorneville, Ont.

of the sentry in the more terrible danger that confronted me.

Suddenly I exerted my strength and thrust the table against the Mexican so forcibly that he staggered backward. Then I caught up a chair and after a swing around my head hurled it toward him like a catapult. It crashed him to the floor, and ere he could

"Quick! for your life—drive on!"

rise again I had thrown up the sash of the window and leaped out.

Fortune often favors the desperate. I alighted full upon the form of the unsuspecting sentry, bearing him to the ground by my weight, where we both rolled in the grass.

Quickly regained my feet and darting away into the lower garden, I endeavored to reach the hedges before my guard could recover himself.

Over my shoulder I saw him kneeling and deliberately pointing at me with his carbine. Before he could fire the flying form of the Mexican descended upon him from the window. There was a flash and a report, but the ball went wide its mark, and instantly the two men were struggling in a death-grapple upon the lawn.

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