

The Fate of a Crown

...BY... SCHUYLER STAUNTON

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(Continued from last week)

CHAPTER XXIII

We aroused ourselves, at this, and regarded the captain attentively. He turned his stern gaze upon me after the other, and gave a growl of satisfaction as he noted no craven amongst us.

"You shall draw cuts, gentlemen, to decide the order in which you must expiate your crime. I will show no partiality. See, here are the slips; a number written upon each. Julio shall place them in his hat and allow you to draw."

He handed the bits of paper to one of his men and strode to the door of Lesba's room.

"Open!" he commanded, giving it a rap with his knuckles.

There was no reply.

"Open!" said he, again, and placed his ear to the panel.

Then, with an sudden gesture, he swung the door inward.

A moment the officer stood motionless, gazing into the chamber. Then he turned to us a face convulsed with anger.

"Who permitted the woman to escape?" he demanded.

The guards, startled and amazed, peered over his shoulders into the vacant room; but none dared to answer.

"What now, Captain, has your fury?" he asked, with a sneer, as the spy entered the room and threw himself carelessly into a chair.

De Souza looked upon his colleague with evident suspicion, and twisted the ends of his moustache in sullen fury. Perhaps he dared not accuse Valcour openly, as the latter was the Emperor's authorized representative. And it may be the captain was not sincerely sorry that Lesba had escaped, and so saved him from the necessity of inciting her, for, after a period of "incense" to cool, and he slowly regained his composure. Valcour, who was watching him, appeared to notice this, and said:

"You forgot the window, my Captain. It was not difficult for the senhiorita to steal across the roadway unobserved and take refuge in the forest. For my part, I am glad she is gone. Our royal master has little credit in condemning a woman to such a death."

"Have a care, senhor! Your words are treasonable."

"The Emperor will be the first to applaud them, when he has time to think. Indeed, de Souza, were I in your place, I should ignore the order to execute these people. His Majesty acted under severe nervous strain, and he will not thank you, believe me, for carrying out his instructions so miserably."

"A soldier's duty is to obey," returned the other stiffly. Then, turning to the tall Uruguayan who held the hat, he added:

"Let the prisoners draw, Julio!"

Another soldier unfastened our bonds, and Paola, who was the first to be approached by Julio, took a slip of paper from the hat and thrust it into his pocket without examination.

Sanchez Bastro drew next, and smiled as he read his number. Then came my turn, and I own that I could not repress a slight trembling of my fingers as I drew forth the fatal slip. It was number four.

"Good!" murmured de Pintra, reading the slip over my shoulder. "I shall not be alive to witness your death, Robert. And that, too, is the last paper from the hat and added: 'I am number two.'"

"I am first," said Bastro, with cheerfulness. "It is an honor, Dom Miguel, and he bowed respectfully to the chief. "Come, gentlemen: we are ready."

It was the captain who spoke, and we rose obediently and filed through the doorway, closely guarded by the Uruguayans.

In the vacant space that served as a yard for Bastro's house stood a solitary date-palm with a straight, slender trunk. Before this we halted, and Bastro was led to the tree and a rope passed around his body securing him to the trunk. They ordered us to stand back, but he waved the men aside.

"I will please me best to look into the muzzles of your guns," said the patriot, in a quiet voice. "I am not afraid, Senhor Capitao, upon your death. De Souza glanced at the sun. It was slowly sinking, a ball of vivid red, into the bosom of the far-away plateau.

At a gesture from the officer six of the guardsmen stepped forward and leveled their carbines upon Bastro, who stood upright against the tree, with a proud smile upon his manly face.

I turned away my head, feeling sick and dizzy; and the rattle of carbines set me trembling with nervous terror. Now did I look toward the tree again, although, after an interval of silence, I heard the tramp of soldiers bearing Bastro's body to the deserted house.

"Number two!" cried de Souza, harshly.

It was no time to turn craven. My own death was but a question of moments, and I realized that I had little time to bid farewell to my kind friend and strive to cheer him upon his way. Going to his side I seized Dom Miguel's hand and pressed it to my lips; but he was not content with that, and caught me in a warm and affectionate embrace.

Then he was led to the tree. I turned my back, covering my face with my hands.

"For the Cause!" I heard his gentle voice say. The carbines rang out again, and a convulsive sob burst from my throat in spite of my strong efforts to control my emotion.

Again I listened to the solemn tread of the soldiers, while from far away the sound of a shout was borne to us upon the still evening air.

Somehow, that distant shout thrilled me with a new-born hope, and I gazed eagerly along the line of roadway that skirted the forest.

De Souza was gazing there, too, with a disturbed look upon his face; but the light was growing dim, and we could see nothing.

"Number three!"

It was Paola's turn, and he walked unassisted to the tree and set his back to it, while the soldiers passed the rope under his arms and then retired. But they left Valcour confronting the prisoner, and I saw the slender finger from Paola's lips and an eager gleam light his pale features.

For a few moments they stood thus, separated from all the rest, and the changing earnest whisper, while the captain stamped his foot with savage impatience.

"Come, come, Valcour!" he called, at last. "You are interfering with my duty. Leave the prisoner, I command you!"

The spy turned around, and his face was positively startling in its expression of intense agony.

"If you are in a hurry, my dear Captain, fire upon us both!" he called, with a muttered oath de Souza strove forward, and seizing Valcour by the arm, dragged him back of the firing-line.

But at that instant a startling sound reached our ears—the sound of a cheer—and with it came the rapid patter of horses' feet.

The soldiers, who had already leveled their guns at Paola, swung suddenly around upon their heels; and, uttering an exclamation of dismay, and the rest of us stood as motionless as if turned to stone.

For stepping around the curve of the forest came a troop of horsemen, led by a girl whose fluttering white kerchief trailed behind her like a banner on the breeze. God! how they rode—the horses plunging madly forward at every bound, their red eyes and distended nostrils bearing evidence of the wild run that had well-nigh exhausted their strength.

And the riders, as they sighted us, screamed curses and encouragement in the same breath, bearing down upon our silent group with the speed of a whirlwind.

There was little time for the Uruguayans to recover from their surprise, for at close range the horsemen let fly a volley from rifle and revolver that did deadly havoc. A few saddles were emptied in return, but almost instantly the soldiers and patriots were engaged in a desperate hand-to-hand conflict, with no quarter given or expected.

De Souza fell wounded at the first volley, and I saw Valcour, with a gleam of light in his eyes, run toward the tree, which was still bound to his tree. But the captain, half raising himself from the ground, aimed his revolver



The head fell back, the light faded from his eyes and left them glazed and staring.

Among them I recognized Pedro, and beckoning him to follow me I returned to the house and lifted a door from its hinges. Between us we bore to the yard and very gently placed Valcour's slight form upon the improvised stretcher.

She moaned at the movement, slowly unclosing her eyes. It was Paola's face that bent over her and Paola that pressed her hand; and she smiled and closed her eyes again, like a tired child.

We carried her into the little chamber from whence Lesba had escaped, and in the outer room lay side by side the silent forms of the martyrs of the Republic!

Tenderly placing Valcour upon the couch, Pedro and I withdrew and closed the door behind us.

I had started to pass through the outer room when I saw a man in a military uniform, who I recognized as the station-master arrested me. Turning back I found that Pedro had knelt beside Dom Miguel and with broken sobs was pressing his forehead against his lips.

My own heart was heavy with sorrow as I leaned over the outstretched form of our beloved chief for a last look into his still face.

Even as I did so my pulse gave a bound of joy. The heavy eyes were closed, but the lips were parted, and expanded in a gentle sigh, and slowly, oh, so slowly—the eyes of Dom Miguel unclosed and gazed upon us with their accustomed sweetness and intelligence.

"Master!" cried Pedro, bending over with trembling eagerness. "It is done! It is done, my master! The Revolution is accomplished—Fonseca is supreme in Rio—the army is ours! The country is ours! God bless the Republic of Brazil!"

Dom Miguel reached out his arms to us, and Pedro and I each clasped a hand within our own.

"I am glad," he whispered, softly. "Glad and content. God bless the Republic of Brazil!"

The head fell back; the light faded from his eyes and left them glazed and staring; a tremor passed through his body, communicating its agony even to us who held his hands, as by an electric shock he passed away.

Pedro still knelt and sobbed, but I contented myself with pressing the hand and laying it gently upon Dom Miguel's breast.

Truly it was done, and well done. In Rio they were hearing the Republic, while here in this isolated cottage, surrounded by the only carnage the Revolution had involved, lay—stilled forever that great heart which had given to its native land the birthright of Liberty.

Lesba had dressed Valcour's wound with surprising skill, and throughout the long, dreary night she bathed the girl's hot forehead and nursed her tenderly as a sister might, while Paola sat silently by and watched her every movement.

In the early morning Pedro summoned us to breakfast, which he had himself prepared; and, as Valcour was sleeping, Lesba and Paola still kept ward in the wounded girl's chamber.

The patriots were digging a trench in which to inter the dead Uruguayans, and I stood in the yard and watched how Fonseca had met the Emperor at the train on his arrival and escorted him, well guarded, to the port, where he was put on board a ship that sailed at once for Lisbon. Indeed, that was to be the fate of Dom Pedro's rule, for the populace immediately proclaimed Fonseca dictator, and the patriot's dream of a Republic of Brazil had become an established fact.

Presently we passed into the outer room and looked upon the still form of Miguel de Pintra, the man to whose genius the new Republic owed its success—the great leader who had miserably perished on the very eve of his noble achievement.

The conspiracy was a conspiracy no longer; it had attained to the dignity of a mastery Revolution, and the Cause of Freedom had once more prevailed!

Taking Lesba's hand we passed the bodies of Bastro and Captain de Souza and gained the yard, talking slowly while she told me how Valcour had assisted her to escape from the chamber, that she might summon the patriots to effect our rescue. She had wandered long in the forest, she explained, before Pedro met her and assisted her to gather the band that had saved us. Yet the brave girl's grief was intense that she had not arrived in time to rescue her guardian, Dom Miguel, whom she so dearly loved.

"That uncle would have died willingly had he known the Republic was assured."

"He did know it," said I. "For a moment, last evening, he recovered consciousness. It was but a moment, but long enough for Pedro to tell him the glorious news of victory. And he died happy, although I know how long he must have waited for him to live to see the triumph of the new Republic. His compatriots would also have taken great pride in honoring Dom Miguel above all men for his faithful service."

She made no reply to this, and for a time we walked on in gloomy silence. "Tell me, Lesba, have you long had knowledge of Valcour's real identity?"

"Francisco told me the truth months ago, and that he loved her," she replied. "But Valcour was sworn to the Emperor's service, and would not list for the warlike cause of the Republics. So they schemed and struggled against one another for the supremacy, while each admired the other's talents, and doubtless longed for the warfare to cease."

"And how came this girl to be the Emperor's spy, masquerading under the guise of a man?" I inquired.

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CHAPTER XXV

It was long ago, that day that brought Liberty to Brazil and glory to the name of Miguel de Pintra. Fate is a cruel puppeteer, and such atoms are easily swept aside and scattered by the mighty flood-tide of events for which we hold capricious Fate responsible.

Yet they leave records, these atoms. I remember how we came to Rio—Valcour, Lesba, Paola, and I—and how Paola was carried through the streets of the Republic, pressed citizens, while vast throngs pressed around to touch the patriot's hand and load him with expressions of love and gratitude. And there was no simpler perch upon the shoulders of the free citizens, while vast throngs pressed around to touch the patriot's hand and load him with expressions of love and gratitude. And there was no simpler perch upon the shoulders of the free citizens, while vast throngs pressed around to touch the patriot's hand and load him with expressions of love and gratitude.

above Dom Miguel. She did not notice my presence until I touched her arm, but then she turned and smiled into my eyes.

"Savior of Brazil!" she whispered softly. "It is splendid and fitting. Did you place it there, Robert?"

"No," I answered; "the credit is due to Plexoto. He claimed the privilege for himself and his associates, and I considered it his right."

"Dear uncle!" said she; and then we turned reverently away and strolled through the gardens. Every flower and shrub lay fair and fresh under the early sun, and we admired them and drank in their fragrance until suddenly, as we turned a corner of the hedge, I stopped and said:

"Lesba, it was here that I first met you; on this exact spot!"

"I remember," she said brightly. "It was here that I prophesied you would be true to the Cause."

"And it was here that I loved you," I added; "for I cannot remember a moment since that first glimpse of your dear face that my heart has not been yours very often."

She grew sober at this speech, and I watched her face anxiously.

"Tell me, Lesba," said I at last, "will you be my wife?"

"And go to your country?" she asked, quickly.

"All my interests are there, and my people, as well," I answered.

"But I cannot leave Brazil," she rejoined, positively. "and Brazil needs me. I have large and important business here placed among nations. Has not Fonseca offered you a position as Director of Commerce?"

"Yes; I am grateful for the honor. But I have large and important business interests at home."

"But your uncle is fully competent to look after them. You have told me as much. We need you here more than they need you at home, for your com-

mercial connections and special training will be of inestimable advantage in assisting the Republic to build up its commerce and extend its interests in foreign lands. Brazil needs you. I need you, Robert! Won't you stay with us—dear? For a time, at least."

On those terms I compromised with Lesba, and we were married on the same day that Valcour and Francisco Paola became man and wife.

"I should have married you, anyway," Lesba confided to me afterward; "but I could not resist the chance to accomplish one master-stroke for the good of my country. And she knew the compliment would cancel the treachery even before I had kissed her."

Dom Miguel's old home became our country residence, and we clung to it every day I could spare from my duties at the capital. It was here our little Valcour was born, and here that Francisco came afterward to bless our love and add to our happiness and contentment. The Paola are our near neighbors, and often Captain Mazanovitch drives over with his son Harcliffe to give the child a romp with our little ones. The old detective is devoted to the whole noisy band, but yesterday I was obliged to reprove Francisco for poking his chubby fingers into the captain's eyes in a futile endeavor to make him raise the ever-drooping lids.

The five-year limit expired long since; but I have never been able to fully separate my interests from those of Brazil, and although our winters are usually passed in New Orleans, where Uncle Nelson remains the vigorous head of our firm, it is in sunny Brazil that my wife and I love best to live.

THE END.



It bore the words: 'Miguel de Pintra, Saviour of Brazil.'

"MIGUEL DE PINTRA, Saviour of Brazil!"

and is to this day the mecca of all good republicans.

Lesba was standing beside the tomb as I approached. Her gown was as white as the marble itself, but a red rose lay upon her bosom and another

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