

# The Cableman

AN EXCITING PRESENT-DAY ROMANCE

BY WEATHERBY CHESNEY

### CHAPTER I A Message in Code

Scarborough was sitting in the best of the siphon-recorder in the room of the cable station at Ribeira Grande. The faint whisper of the apparatus was round him, and the afternoon mist of the Azores had crept into the room and chilled the air. He had been on duty for nearly eight hours, but though he was tired, he was hardly conscious of the fact. He was straining his eyes for a message, expected but long delayed, had stretched his nerves and driven away all thoughts of fatigue.

The message for which Scarborough was watching meant peace or war between the nations of the world. For international politics had reached a crisis. A certain diplomatic cable had been presented, and the answer was expected hourly. If the message were peace, the world would probably never know that there had been a crisis at all. But the servants of the great cable companies necessarily know the greater and earlier knowledge than the rest of mankind; and it is by no means the fact, as many suppose, that the most important news is conveyed through their hands in an intelligible cipher. Diplomacy is a monster, hunting by tortuous paths, and loves to shroud its tracks in obscurity; but sometimes even diplomats speak out, and when they do their words are apt to be momentous.

In every Chancellery of the world there are men waiting for the answer which an Imperial courier was bearing post haste to the court of St. James's.

Scarborough glanced for the fiftieth time at the ribbon of paper which came from the siphon-recorder, and saw that it registered a plain, straight line. Nothing was passing over the cable but now.

He dropped his chin on his hand, and stared at the instrument as though he starting he could force the news from it. There was no hint of impatience in the attitude or movement, and a strong patience that would be likely to win its way in life by reading calmly with a square front, and then calmly wearing it down. He was about twenty-five. The lines on his face were deep for a man of his years, but they were lines given by experience, not by suffering in the past. He looked like a man who might take the hardy, because he would shrink from his responsibilities; who would fight, if he had to fight, bravely and honorably; but who, as yet, had not been called upon to show the grit that made him. When he smiled—which was often—the lines vanished, and showed the face of a strong, good-humored boy.

But though his nerves were tense with excitement now, he had not been able to infect with his own eagerness the man who was on duty with him. A laborious elaborate yawn, from a chair behind him, echoed round the walls of the instrument room, and caused the quick smile to show itself on Scarborough's face. Scott, the man in the chair, was supposed to be sharing his watch; but he was one of those who take life easily, and his method was to read a French novel in a big chair until Scarborough should give him the word that the instruments were talking. Then he would rise, stretch himself, and take his share of the work.

"What a phlegmatic beggar you are," said Scarborough. "Enormous yawns being decided, and the news may come at any minute, and I don't believe you're even interested!"

"Right, I'm not," Scott answered cheerfully. "Don't care for politics. Don't understand 'em, you see. Don't believe what there is to worry about."

"A European war is generally counted as a pretty important thing," said Scarborough dryly.

"Oh, yes, if it comes off! But it won't. Let's talk of something interesting. Going to the circus?"

Scarborough laughed.

"What circus?" he asked.

"There you are!" said Scott triumphantly. "You're just as ignorant as I am in your own way. My ignorance concerns European politics—an admit-

tenly unsavory music; yours concerns the things that are taking place under your nose. What circus? Val B. Montague's American Circus Combination, of course. The whole island of San Miguel is placarded with pictures of beautiful ladies on bare-backed steeds, balancing at extraordinary angles. It's the most exciting thing that has been in the Azores for a year. I went across to Ponta Delgada to see it yesterday."

"Oh? Good show?" asked Scarborough carelessly, keeping his gaze fixed on the ribbon of paper which came from the siphon-recorder.

"Pretty fair," said Scott, whose novel had bored him, and made him want to talk, even though he failed to interest. "There's a nice little girl who calls herself Mademoiselle Mona de la Mar, and does the bareback business—not like the pictures, but decently enough; and there's a very English-looking cowboy who shoots glass balls and things with very moderate success. 'Tisn't a bad show though, on the whole, and Val B. Montagu is beautiful."

"What does he do?" Scarborough asked next.

"Nothing in the ring. But he runs the whole show none-the-less and, prevents breaches of the peace amongst his troupe. No easy job that, I gathered. They've been touring the Atlantic Islands and the West Coast of Africa for a year and a half in a two-hundred-ton schooner, and the clown hasn't murdered the ring-master yet, though Val B. seems to be very much inclined to offer odds that he will very soon. Fine fellow, Val B. Took my whisky and soda with the air of conferring a favor on me, and was graciously pleased to say that he would come over here on Tuesday to have dinner with me, if his children—that's what he calls the troupe—did not need him. I fancy he's nervous about the clown and the ring-master."

"What's the trouble between them?" asked Scarborough, more for the sake of continuing the conversation than because he cared. "Is it Mademoiselle Mona?"

"No," said Scott. "I understood that it was merely a case of professional jealousy. They've been boxed up together on that schooner for eighteen months, you see, with nothing to do at sea except quarrel, and nothing to interest them in the show they give when they're ashore. Come over with me to-night, and make Val B. Montague's acquaintance."

Scarborough did not answer. A message was coming through at last. The ribbon of paper from the siphon-recorder showed an irregular, wavy line now, and he read off the message in the hills and valleys of the Morse code as the instrument passed it through.

"Page, Chinelas, Ribeira Grande. Danger—circus."

That was all. It was obviously not the message for which he was waiting; nor was it, at first sight, either interesting or intelligible, unless one happened to know the code by which those two words "danger—circus" were to be interpreted. Scarborough did not know the code; and yet, because of the person to whom it was addressed, the cablegram interested him profoundly. Had he been able to foresee the difference which its arrival would presently make to him, his interest would perhaps have been even greater.

"Anything?" asked Scott listlessly.

"Private message, in code," said Scarborough, and Scott returned to his novel with a grunt.

Scarborough sent the message through to the Post Office for delivery, and then rose and went to the window. Through a break in the mist he could see about a mile away a white-washed house, built in the shelter of two great masses of grey volcanic stone that projected curiously from the side of a green hill. The two rocks were called, in Portuguese, as Chinelas—the slippers,—from a resemblance, not however very striking, which they were supposed to bear to a pair of rather down-at-heel slippers. The white-washed house took its name from them.

It had been in the possession, for the last two years, of an Englishman, who, having come to the Azores as an invalid seeking for health, had not found that for which he sought, but had stayed, because the place had suited

him. His daughter kept house for him at the Chinelas; and in this fact was the explanation of Scarborough's interest in the message which had just passed through his hands.

Scott broke suddenly into his meditations.

"You haven't said whether you'll go with me to the circus to-night," he remarked. He did not believe in leaving matters of real importance unsettled.

Scarborough started. The cablegram had coupled the word circus and danger. A coincidence, of course. It was surely impossible that it should be anything else, and yet Scarborough felt a sudden misgiving. Was danger coming to Elsa Page? Oh, nonsense! code messages often combine words queerly coincidentally.

"Can't," he said. "I've promised to play chess with Mr. Page to-night."

Scott pursed up his lips, and looked at his friend doubtfully.

"Oh, ah! um! At the Chinelas!" he remarked slowly. "Do you care much for chess?"

"Loathe it!" admitted Scarborough, with a laugh.

"So I thought. And yet you play at the Chinelas every second night or so. Bit risky, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. You know your own business best, of course. Miss Page is a nice girl; pretty too, but—" he broke off.

"But what?" demanded Scarborough, with a quick flash of anger. "Do you criticize her?"

"No," said Scott. "I believe she's as nice a girl as you think she is. And that's giving her high praise, you know."

Scarborough waited a moment, and then said:

"Well? Go on."

"I don't like her father," said Scott, with decision.

"Confound you, did she ever ask you to?"

"She will ask you to, if he becomes your father-in-law," was the retort. "And you won't be able to do it gracefully. The man's a wrong'un, and you know it as well as I do."

"I know nothing against him," said Scarborough hotly. "nor do you."

Scott nodded calmly. "That's true," he admitted, "nothing definite, that is. But, like you, I've spent odd half hours in his company; not as many as you have, but enough to make me back my opinion with perfect confidence. A man who shakes hands in the way he does, for one thing, can't possibly be straight. But don't lose your temper, old man. The daughter isn't the father, and I'll admit that it's none of my business in any case. To change the subject—look at the recorder. There's something coming over, isn't there?"

Scarborough went to the instrument and read the message aloud:

"Courier arrived in London this morning with important despatches from Berlin. It is officially announced that His Imperial Majesty will be present in the Hohenzollern during Cowes week, and that the Meteor will be entered for the principal race."

"Rather cryptic!" said Scott. "What does it mean, in plain English?"

"It means," said Scarborough, "that His Imperial Majesty has thought it prudent to climb down, and that there is not going to be a European war after all."

He sat down at the table and sent on to its destination this message which seemed to speak only of sport, but which would cause many an anxious diplomat to sleep more easily that night than he had slept for a week. Then he turned to Scott.

"Our watch is over," he said. "I can hear Mason and Davitt coming to relieve us. You are going to the circus?"

"Yes. Let me book a seat for you?"

"Yes, please; afternoon performance tomorrow two seats."

"Two seats!" echoed Scott. "For yourself and—"

"Miss Page," said Scarborough, and Scott laughed shortly.

CHAPTER II

"I love him, and I have to lie to him still."

Two hours later Scarborough set out for the Chinelas, to play chess with Mr. Page as he had promised. As he walked he again thought of those two words in the cable message which had passed through his hands. Lovers are fanciful. Was it possible that they were not code words at all, but that the reference was to a real danger that was coming near to the girl whom he loved? Scarborough framed the question in his mind, and then laughed out loud at the absurdity of it. There could be no connection between Elsa Page and Val B. Montague, with his troupe of quarrelsome and probably tenth-rate stars. Of course the message was only code!

But when he was shown into the drawing-room of the Chinelas, and Elsa Page came forward to greet him, he saw at once, with the quickness of apprehension which love gives, that she was in trouble.

"I would have sent to tell you not to come," she said; "but I had no messenger."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Father's gout is very painful to-night, and he doesn't feel equal to chess. He asked me to make his excuses for him."

"I'm sorry," said Scarborough. "But there's something more, isn't there?"

"Something more?"

"You are in trouble? Something has happened?"

Elsa looked at him for a moment without speaking, and a hint of distress showed itself in her eyes; but she shook her head.

"No," she said steadily. "Nothing has happened."

Scarborough watched her as she took up a piece of fancy-work and fingered it aimlessly, and he knew that she was not speaking the truth. Yesterday when he had left her she had been happy and natural, and to-night he had meant to ask her to be his wife. But to-night she was different. There was a constraint in her manner, there had been almost a coldness in her greeting, and he no longer felt his yesterday's confidence in the answer which she would give him, if he said the words he had come to say. Between to-night and yesterday something had happened, though she denied it. And that something had spoiled the understanding which had been between them.

He came a little nearer to her.

"Elsa," he said gently.

She gave him a hurried look, almost, he thought, of fear; and then she covered her face with her hands.

"She was not crying, but a shiver shook her, and then left her calm. She took her hands from her face, and raised her eyes to his with a grave look of questioning.

She was not one of those women whom men, at a first meeting, called handsome. Amongst a group of other girls, she might conceivably have been overlooked or unnoticed; and yet she was, in her own dainty way, beautiful. There was no luxury of coloring, but the delicately modeled features were perfect; her figure was slight, but the curves of it were exquisitely proportioned. She had the faintness of carved ivory. Hers was not the kind of beauty which compels instant attention; but it was the kind which wears well. In old age she would still be beautiful, when the merely handsome, or the merely pretty, would have faded to the merely commonplace.

"Elsa," said Scarborough again.

"I have not given you the right to call me that," she said.

"I came to-night to ask you to give me the right."

She covered her face again.

"Don't, don't!" she cried.

He came closer to her, drew her hands away from her face and took one of them in his.

"Elsa, I love you."

"Don't!" she cried again.

"When I use the word 'don't,' when I do," he asked, smiling; for she had not drawn her hand away.

"I mean, don't say it!"

"Not when it is the truth? Elsa, will you be my wife?"

The hand was drawn away now, slowly; but there was no hint of yielding in the voice, when she answered:

"No, Horace."

He let her hands fall, and stood for a moment without speaking. He did not plead with her. He knew that she was not one of the sort who say 'no,' because they want to be persuaded to say 'yes.' And even had there been the least likelihood that pleading would make her change her mind, Horace Scarborough would not have pleaded. He was not of the kind who plead.

"You call me by my Christian name," he said presently. "You have never done that before. Why do you do it now?"

"May I not? You called me Elsa."

"I was asking for the right to do so always. You will not give me the right?"

"I will—Horace," she said slowly.

He made as though he would go to her again, but checked himself. He did not understand her, but her refusal of his offer had been definite. She must explain.

She came and put a hand upon his shoulder, looking up into his eyes.

"I will not have you for my husband," she said, "but I want you for my friend. So I want to be allowed to call you Horace, and I want you to call me Elsa. Other people call me Miss Page; but I should like to feel that to you I am Elsa—only Elsa—do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand!" he said bitterly. "You are giving me one of the privileges of a lover, and refusing all others. I understand all but your motive. If you were a flirt, I could understand that too; but you are not. You are not the girl who offers an inch, and means an ell to be taken. Why do you offer me the inch?"

She shivered slightly, for the resentment in his voice hurt her. After a brief pause, she said:

"Suppose it is because I hate to hear the name Miss Page on your lips! Suppose that every time I hear it I feel a rush of shame. Won't you spare me that? Wouldn't you be willing to take my inch?"

"Though I am never to have the ell?"

"Though probably—you are never to have the ell."

"Elsa," he cried, almost fiercely, "you say things which I find it hard to understand. You refuse me, and then qualify your refusal with a 'probably'; you say that you feel a rush of shame when I call you by your father's name, and you ask to be only Elsa to me. What does it all mean?"

"It means, Horace, that I want a friend," she answered simply.

"Are you in any trouble?" He thought of the cablegram, and added—"or danger?"

"I am in trouble. I don't think I am in danger."

He came to her and took her hand again.

"Forgive me," he said gently. "I'm a brute to bully you. I will ask no more questions. Tell me as much or as little as you like, but let me help you if I can."

A look of relief passed across her face, but immediately afterwards it vanished, and she shrank back from him. For a brief moment she seemed to struggle with herself. Then she looked into his eyes.

"On my conditions?" she asked gravely.

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"On your conditions," he answered. She rose and went to the window. The night was dark, and she could see nothing, and the cold mist rolled in and made her shiver again. She turned suddenly to the young man.

"Will you take me to-morrow to see the circus which has come to Ponta Delgada?" she asked.

Scarborough thought again of the cablegram, and he feared for her—feared for the danger which she could not tell him of, but which seemed, in spite of her denial, to threaten vaguely but ominously.

"Why do you want to go?" he asked.

"You said you would ask me no more questions," she reminded him. "I cannot tell you my reason."

"I beg your pardon. I forgot. Yes, I will take you. I have already booked two seats."

"Thank you," she said, and then added simply: "I must go back to father now. He is waiting for me."

Scarborough accepted the dismissal. She went with him to the door, and stood watching him as he rode away. She had said that she must return to her father, but instead she stood looking out into the night, and a great longing came upon her to call this young man back to her side, and bid him tell his love again. For she loved him. But for one thing, she, too, might have avowed her love, and not been ashamed. But there was something which he did not know of, a secret in her life, which made it impossible; and her heart cried out with a great bitterness against the fate which denied her thus the right to love.

Two years ago she had been a happy and carefree child; then the cloud came suddenly, and darkened everything. She had come out to the islands with her father, who was, so the world said, a fugitive from English justice. But she believed then that the world was wrong.

She had landed in San Miguel, burning with a generous indignation at the injustice of men and full of enthusiasm for the fight with her father, and she would win together. The cloud which had come over the brightness of her young life was black, but she believed that it would soon be dissipated. The truth would be known, and meanwhile exile in her father's company was no real hardship to a girl of seventeen.

But two years had passed, and the cloud showed no signs of lifting. Moreover her father, so far as she knew, had made no effort to escape from under its shadow, had been contented to live in the gloom, and seemed to have lost all longing for the light of day and truth.

He had sunk, with seeming content, into the role of confirmed invalid, nursing his gout and spending his days in profitless study of the philosophy of Herbert Spencer—profitless, and even criminal; for meanwhile he did nothing to remove the stain which lay upon his name.

It was this—the mental apathy which disguised itself in fruitless intellectual labor—which Elsa did not understand. It was this which almost

(To Be Continued.)

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