

Chapter XLII.

It was not Tremolino's fault that the syndicate depended so much on the wit and wisdom and the information of Dona Rita. She had taken a little furnished house on the Prado for the good of the cause-- Por el Rey! She was always taking little houses for somebody's good, for the sick or the sorry, for broken-down artists, cleaned-out gamblers, temporarily unlucky speculators--vieux amis--old friends, as she used to explain apologetically, with a shrug of her fine shoulders.

Whether Don Carlos was one of the "old friends," too, it's hard to say. More unlikely things have been heard of in smoking-rooms. All I know is that one evening, entering incautiously the salon of the little house just after the news of a considerable Carlist success had reached the faithful, I was seized round the neck and waist and whirled recklessly three times round the room, to the crash of upsetting furniture and the humming of a valse tune in a warm contralto voice.

When released from the dizzy embrace, I sat down on the carpet-- suddenly, without affectation. In this unpretentious attitude I became aware that J. M. K. B. had followed me into the room, elegant, fatal, correct and severe in a white tie and large shirt-front. In answer to his politely sinister, prolonged glance of inquiry, I overheard Dona Rita murmuring, with some confusion and annoyance, "Vous etes bete mon cher. Voyons! Ca n'a aucune consequence." Well content in this case to be of no particular consequence, I had already about me the elements of some worldly sense.

Rearranging my collar, which, truth to say, ought to have been a round one above a short jacket, but was not, I observed felicitously that I had come to say good-bye, being ready to go off to sea that very night with the Tremolino. Our hostess, slightly panting yet, and just a shade dishevelled, turned tartly upon J. M. K. B., desiring to know when HE would be ready to go off by the Tremolino, or in any other way, in order to join the royal headquarters. Did he intend, she asked ironically, to wait for the very eve of the entry into Madrid? Thus by a judicious exercise of tact and asperity we re-established the atmospheric equilibrium of the room long before I left them a little before midnight, now tenderly reconciled, to walk down to the harbour and hail the Tremolino by the usual soft whistle from the edge of the quay. It was our signal, invariably heard by the ever-watchful Dominic, the padrone.

He would raise a lantern silently to light my steps along the narrow, springy plank of our primitive gangway. "And so we are going off," he would murmur

directly my foot touched the deck. I was the harbinger of sudden departures, but there was nothing in the world sudden enough to take Dominic unawares. His thick black moustaches, curled every morning with hot tongs by the barber at the corner of the quay, seemed to hide a perpetual smile. But nobody, I believe, had ever seen the true shape of his lips. From the slow, imperturbable gravity of that broad-chested man you would think he had never smiled in his life. In his eyes lurked a look of perfectly remorseless irony, as though he had been provided with an extremely experienced soul; and the slightest distension of his nostrils would give to his bronzed face a look of extraordinary boldness. This was the only play of feature of which he seemed capable, being a Southerner of a concentrated, deliberate type. His ebony hair curled slightly on the temples. He may have been forty years old, and he was a great voyager on the inland sea.

Astute and ruthless, he could have rivalled in resource the unfortunate son of Laertes and Anticlea. If he did not pit his craft and audacity against the very gods, it is only because the Olympian gods are dead. Certainly no woman could frighten him. A one-eyed giant would not have had the ghost of a chance against Dominic Cervoni, of Corsica, not Ithaca; and no king, son of kings, but of very respectable family--authentic Caporali, he affirmed. But that is as it may be. The Caporali families date back to the twelfth century.

For want of more exalted adversaries Dominic turned his audacity fertile in impious stratagems against the powers of the earth, as represented by the institution of Custom-houses and every mortal belonging thereto--scribes, officers, and guardacostas afloat and ashore. He was the very man for us, this modern and unlawful wanderer with his own legend of loves, dangers, and bloodshed. He told us bits of it sometimes in measured, ironic tones. He spoke Catalonian, the Italian of Corsica and the French of Provence with the same easy naturalness. Dressed in shore-togs, a white starched shirt, black jacket, and round hat, as I took him once to see Dona Rita, he was extremely presentable. He could make himself interesting by a tactful and rugged reserve set off by a grim, almost imperceptible, playfulness of tone and manner.

He had the physical assurance of strong-hearted men. After half an hour's interview in the dining-room, during which they got in touch with each other in an amazing way, Rita told us in her best grande dame manner: "Mais il esi parfait, cet homme." He was perfect. On board the Tremolino, wrapped up in a black caban, the picturesque cloak of Mediterranean seamen, with those massive moustaches and his remorseless eyes set off by the shadow of the deep hood, he looked piratical and monkish and darkly initiated into the most awful mysteries of the sea.