

A Strange Conspiracy

by Edward Phillips Oppenheim, 1866-1946

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THE governor's wife rose suddenly from her chair, and waved her fan toward me. It was a summons not to be disregarded. I hastened to present myself before her.

We passed across the room, dexterously avoiding several interruptions. Directly we were by ourselves Lady Marsham's manner underwent a change.

Assured that there was no one within hearing she leaned forward in her chair and looked at me with a gleam of anxiety in her blue eyes.

„Philip,” she said, „I want to ask you a question.”

„There are several I should like to ask you before I leave Jamaica,” I said in a low voice.

„Don't be foolish,” she said. „I am in earnest.”

Lady Marsham was really a very pretty woman, and I was extremely fond of her. So I looked up reproachfully.

„In earnest. I, too—am very much in earnest.”

„Once and for all, Philip, I did not bring you out here to talk nonsense. Why, I'm old enough to be your mother; and—”

„Oh!”

„Don't interrupt me, please. I want most particularly to ask you a question. Have you received any anonymous letters during the last few days?”

I was honestly amazed.

„Why, yes, I have,” I admitted. „Two most extraordinary ones.”

„You haven't them with you by any chance?” she asked eagerly.

I felt in my breast pocket, and produced them. Here and there the terrace was lit with Japanese lanterns. I detached one, and held it so that the flame, steady enough in the breathless air, shone full upon the sheet of heavily-scented and strangely-woven note-paper. There was neither address or orthodox commencement—only a few lines hastily scrawled in a feminine but evidently disguised handwriting.

You are a stranger to me, Philip Atherstone, but I have a fancy to do you a good turn. Your passage is booked in the AURORA, which leaves Jamaica Nov. 2. If it is in any way possible for you to do so, leave instead by the ARGONAUT Oct. 24. If you are not able to do this, let nothing prevent you from leaving on Nov. 2. It is possible that other plans will be proposed to you. Remember my warning, and do not accept them.

The second letter, which was shorter, had only reached me two days before. It was written on the same sort of note paper, and apparently in the same handwriting.

The ARGONAUT has sailed, and you are still here. I hope most earnestly that you will not disregard my warning. If your life and honour are dear to you, if you ever wish to see England again, leave on the AURORA. Efforts will be made to prevent you. Disregard them. Those who will propose other plans to you are not trustworthy. These are true words, and the writer runs a risk which you know nothing of in sending you this warning. May it not be in vain.

„Well,” I said, „what do you think of them?”

„Extraordinary,” she declared.

„And how on earth,” I asked, „did you know that I had received them?”

„Because I myself,” she answered, in a low tone, „have received a precisely similar one.”

„It is either a hoax,” I declared, „or someone here is very anxious to see the back of me. You didn't write them yourself, did you Lady Marsham?”

She looked at me reproachfully.

„I feel convinced that the whole thing is a myth.”

„And I am equally convinced,” Lady Marsham said, firmly, „that it is nothing of the sort.”

„At any rate,” I said, „I am sure to avoid this threatened calamity, for I am most certainly sailing tomorrow on the AURORA.”

„You are going direct to London?” she asked.

„As fast as steamship and express train can take me,” I declared.

„Do I know her?” she asked.

„There is no her. It is just a fit of homesickness. I am longing to walk along Pall Mall, to drop into the club for lunch, to see a few old faces again, and find myself inside a London theatre.“

She sighed ever so slightly.

„You are quite right, Philip. This is nothing less than banishment. If I had understood that diplomacy, as Sir William called it, was likely to turn out such a pitiful apology for a career, and—well—“

I straightened myself instinctively. Sir William was standing a few yards away from us, fumbling with his glasses. Upon his arm was a lady who was a stranger to me.

„Dear me, dear me!” he exclaimed. “I am quite convinced that her ladyship is close at hand. I regret very much that she should not have been in her place to receive you.“

The lady answered him, and at the sound of her voice I rose to my feet and looked eagerly in her direction.

The voice and the speaker were alike unusual. I looked eagerly through the darkness. I could see nothing but a white face and diamonds, before whose brilliancy Lady Marsham’s gems seemed but the poorest paste. But the voice, slow, deep, strangely musical, was unusual enough to provoke more than curiosity.

„Lady Marsham can scarcely be everywhere, and I for one do not blame her for desiring to escape if only for a moment from what I am afraid she must find a very thankless task.”

So I saw for the first time the woman who was to become the enigma of my life. I stood on one side for a moment whilst the usual small courtesies were proceeding. Then Lady Marsham turned toward me.

„Let me present Mr. Philip Atherstone to you, Miss Hoyt,” she said. „Mr. Atherstone will execute any commission in London for you. He leaves Jamaica tomorrow.“

Now in an ordinary way I am not an observant person, but Miss Hoyt was one of those young women who anywhere and at any time have the powers to rivet attention upon themselves. I had been watching her closely from the moment she had appeared, not of my own will altogether, but of necessity.

At the mention of my name there had come into her face a singular change. I was quite sure that save myself no one had noticed it. But I had heard the quick breath indrawn between her teeth, I had seen the startled light which flashed for a moment in her deep, still eyes.

„I am glad to know Mr. Atherstone,” she said. „I think that I have heard of some of his work.“

„It is more than likely,” Sir William remarked. „Mr. Atherstone is one of those who bring water from the mountains to the cities, and build bridges in impossible places. My dear,” he added, turning toward his wife, “there are others of our guests who may think our presence desirable. Will you permit me?“

Lady Marsham rose wearily up and took his arm. So I was left alone with Miss Hoyt.

„Tomorrow, then, Mr. Atherstone,” she said, turning towards me at last, „you are going home.”

„We sail at daybreak,” I answered.

She roused herself as though with an effort, spoke of my work in Jamaica and passing lightly on to larger subjects, showed herself to be a girl of unusual intelligence, cultivated, and well-read. We talked perhaps for half an hour.

„What time does the ARGONAUT sail?” she asked again.

„At daybreak.”

„And what time does the American boat arrive?”

„It is due about midday tomorrow,” I answered, „but it is generally 12 hours late.”

What satisfaction she could derive from this intelligence I could not then imagine. But she certainly seemed pleased. A gun boomed out from the point.

„What is that?” she asked, sharply.

„It is usually the signal for the arrival of the mails,” I said, „but there is no steamer due tonight. Watch for the lights on the hill over there.”

Presently a blue light flashed out, and immediately afterward a red one.

„Why, it’s the American boat,” I exclaimed, „in 12 hours before her time. Such a thing has never occurred since I have been on the island. Let us go and tell the governor.”

She detained me. Her face in the moonlight seemed white and drawn, her dark eyes were filled with fear.

„Do not go,” she exclaimed. „I want to talk to you!”

„By all means,” I answered. „I was coming back.”

„Do you know what that means?” she asked, looking fixedly at me.

„It means a very fast passage,” I answered doubtfully.

„It is you,” she said, „who are the cause of it.”

I looked at her in blank amazement. She met my gaze without flinching.

„Yes! There are men on her who wished to intercept you. The captain has been bribed.”

„To intercept me,” I repeated, vaguely. „Dear Miss Hoyt, you are mistaking me, I am sure, for someone else. I am Philip Atherstone, engineer, a person of no consequence whatever. I have few friends certainly, but no enemies.”

„Listen to me,” she said, „listen very carefully, for I speak for your own good. Before you leave tomorrow an offer will be made to you to undertake some work for a country which you have probably never visited before. On no account must you accept this offer. Do you hear? Promise me that you will sail in the ARGONAUT whatever happens. They will try to tempt you. You must be resolute. Promise me that you will.”

I plucked the letters from my pocket.

„You wrote these?” I exclaimed.

„Yes! You should have gone by the AURORA.”

I hesitated. I was 35 years old, and had not yet outlived the love for adventure which had sent me roving over the world as soon as I had escaped from my teens. And while I hesitated I heard Lady Marsham’s voice from the other end of the terrace.

„At least,“ I said hastily, „I will promise this. I will accept no offer without very careful consideration, from whomever it may come. And I can assure you that nothing will prevent my first visiting London.“

„You will sail on the ARGONAUT, whatever happens?“

„Whatever happens,“ I repeated.

Past the silent white houses, I rode into the city and made my way to the hotel. A sleepy-looking clerk came out to meet me in the hall.

„There are two gentlemen here to see you, sir,“ he announced. „They arrived by the MANHATTAN tonight.“

I took the letters which he had handed me, and passed on to the smoking-room. There was a babel of conversation in many languages. I stood upon the threshold for a moment looking round. Then I felt a touch upon my elbow, and a voice in my ear.

„It is Mr. Philip Atherstone, I believe!“

I had pictured to myself something sinister—the result this, no doubt, of Miss Hoyt’s warnings. Almost I felt inclined to laugh at myself. The young man whose hand was already outstretched was about my age, or less, irreproachably dressed in white ducks, with dark, oval face, the complexion of a girl, and a smile which, if a little foreign in its pronouncement, was at least friendly.

„My name is Anthony. I and a friend who is with me have a matter of business to discuss with you if you can spare us a few moments.“

Then rose up from before a small table, on which stood two tumblers and a bottle of champagne, a short, thick-set man, with skin as yellow as old parchment, black eyes set close together, a black beard brought to a point and black hair close-shaven to his head, standing up from the scalp like the bristles of a blacking brush.

„This is Mr. Gorrino, of whom, doubtless, you have heard,“ my new acquaintance said.

I endeavoured to look as though the name of Gorrino was a household word with me.

„I am at your service, gentlemen,“ I declared. „I will only remind you that the ARGONAUT sails at daybreak, and I have my clothes to change and still a little packing to do.“

Mr Anthony looked around him. The room was certainly full of all sorts and conditions of people.

„If you will do us the honour,“ he said, “to grant us a short interview in my friend’s sitting-room, we will endeavour to detain you but a few moments, whatever the upshot of our conversation may be.”

Now I had stayed in the hotel more than once, but I had never yet penetrated to the part towards which I was now led. We passed along many passages and out of the back of the building. Then along a covered way through the gardens to a sort of single-storied annex which I had seen more than once, but never explored.

The annex was gloomy, and had a generally unoccupied look. I had an idea from its appearance that we were the only persons in it.

The younger man, who came last into the room, lingered for a moment with the handle in his hand. I turned sharply round in time to see him turn the lock.

He met my look of amazement with a smile which broadened into a laugh. He held the key out to me.

„Pray do not think I am endeavouring to compel a hearing from you,” he exclaimed. „It is simply that I do not wish to be disturbed, and there is one who might find it to his interest to break up our little council.”

He laid the key upon the table by my side, and busied himself with one of the champagne bottles.

„You will take a glass of wine with us, Mr. Atherstone—and there are cigars at your elbow.”

„You are very kind,” I answered. „I won’t refuse, but really I should be much obliged if you would let me know the nature of this business.”

„You have no idea as to its nature, then?” he asked quickly.

„None whatever! Why do you ask?”

„Come, come,” Mr. Gorrino said, „we must be quite candid with our young friend. O, yes! There is a person now upon the island who might. O, yes, she might have given you one hint. Yes, indeed, we expected it.”

„If you mean Miss Hoyt,” I said, thoughtlessly, „all that I have heard from her is a warning to depart by the ARGONAUT tomorrow, and to listen to no propositions whatever which would involve any change in my plans.”

I could have bitten my tongue out immediately afterwards, for the glance which passed between the two men was like silent lightning with none of its harmlessness. They seemed for the moment transformed.

The girl-like smoothness of Mr. Anthony’s face, and the calm courtesy of his manner seemed rent aside. His face was convulsed with anger, his eyes had narrowed, and were evil things to look upon.

And the older man looked back at him with a fierce return of his anger, a glance at once satyr-like and full of the promise of vengeance.

All this seemed to come and go in a space of time which only a thought could measure, and then sat there once more a harmless looking fat little foreigner, with humorous eyes and bland features, and a man whose clear, fresh boyishness and light smile would have won him a second glance from any woman in the world. But my eyes were opened.

„Not that anything which Miss Hoyt said could have affected my plans in the slightest,” I continued with emphasis. „They are already irrevocable.”

Anthony sipped his wine and looked at me with forehead wrinkled in protest.

„We must hope, Mr. Atherstone,” he said, „to hear you change that word. For frankly our purpose is to induce you to make some alteration in your plans.”

„I am sorry,” I said, „but it will be useless.”

„Come!” he said, „we must remember that virtually we are un-introduced to you. We can scarcely hope to possess your confidence. You came into the smoking room holding letters in your hand—and I think a telegram. Will you be so good as to refer to them? It may be that the recommendation which we have asked from some of your friends are amongst them.”

I looked through the little bundle at once. I opened first the cable. It was from London.

RECOMMEND SERIOUS CONSIDERATION OF ANY OFFER MADE YOU BY
GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL. MOULTON.

Now, Sir George Moulton was the head of the firm of engineers with whom I was a very junior partner, and I must admit that the reading of that cable somewhat reassured me.

„You, then,” I asked, „are representing the government of Brazil?”

Anthony looked at me with wide-open eyes. Then he laughed softly.

„My friend here,” he explained, „is minister of public works, and I am the private secretary to the president.”

One other among my letters referred to their visit, and that was sealed and signed by a very great man. It was short enough:

*My Dear Atherstone—The Brazilian minister has paid me a call today for the sole purpose of asking whether your quasi official position would stand in the way of their making you a very exceptional offer to undertake some work in Brazil. After some consideration I have decided that in your interest it is only fair to allow you a free hand. I have, therefore, supplied your address to Mr. Ferraro, who is cabling it to Brazil, and you have my best wishes should you decide to accept the offer. I am, yours most sincerely,
Powerfield.*

I laid the letter and the cable down.

„I am very much flattered, gentlemen,” I said, „that you should have thought it worth while to take this trouble to procure my services. Perhaps you will explain exactly what you require of me.”

„Our country is passing through an era of unexampled prosperity. Large sums have been voted for public work which for many years have been neglected. We want an irrigation scheme, an aqueduct, a bridge which will be the longest in the world, and several less important matters.

„We are willing to pay, but we want the best man. We have engaged Colquhoun, and we want you to work with him. We are empowered to offer you £10,000 a year for five years, and an honorarium of £40,000 on the successful termination of your work.”

„Gentlemen,” I said, „this is a most extraordinary offer. I have been, it is true, successful during my last few undertakings, but I cannot help feeling that my work and experience do not warrant anything of this sort. I am really only a mining engineer, and—“

Anthony turned to me seriously.

„Mr. Atherstone,” he said, „we who make you this offer have satisfied ourselves as to your fitness for the work. The offer is a bona fide one.”

„Then I have no option,” I answered, „but to accept it most gratefully.”

„I must confess,” the younger man remarked, „that we did not contemplate any different decision. It has been fortunately within our power to offer you terms which we believe to be almost unique.”

„The final agreement,” I remarked, „I can doubtless arrange with your minister in London.”

„In London!” Anthony looked up at me as though in surprise. „But, of course. Why not!” he exclaimed. „That reminds me, though,” he continued, „that we wish you to return to Brazil with us tomorrow, and discuss all details of our schemes with the president. Afterwards, if you wish, when things are on the way, you can take a few months’ holiday in London.”

For a moment I was back again in the residency. I saw amongst the shadows a dark, languid face. I heard her speak—every word a warning. I saw her eye, pleading, insistent.

I shook my head.

„I am afraid,” I said, „that whatever happens I must visit London first. I must sail this morning on the ARGONAUT.”

„Let me see,” Anthony remarked thoughtfully. „It would mean a delay of—how long?”

„Three months at least,” Gorrino said, shaking his head. „We must talk to our young friend, Anthony. The president is very impatient. We must try and persuade him.”

„I am sorry,” I said, „but I am really overworked. A few days in London are absolutely necessary for me.”

„For rest,” Anthony suggested, suavely, „what could be better than a sea voyage?”

„It is so hard to make you understand,” I said slowly, „without seeming ungrateful. But indeed I am not a free agent in this matter. My passage is booked in the ARGONAUT, and my sailing by her has become a necessity.”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders. They both seemed to regard me as a spoilt child with whom reasoning had become futile.

„At least, Mr. Atherstone,” the former said, drinking up his wine, „you will always be able to say that you refused the most liberal offer ever made to a man of your youth. It will be something to be proud of. I trust you will never repent it.”

I was staggered.

„I am to understand, then,” I said blankly, „that your offer is withdrawn if I do not accompany you to Brazil from here?”

„It is absolutely necessary that there should be no delay at all,” Anthony said. „For this reason: The government of Brazil is stable enough and soundly established, but it is not, of course, so firmly established as the government of your great European nation.

„The vote for granting the money was carried after a fierce struggle, but it is liable to be rescinded. If the works are commenced—well, the matter is ended. Nothing can be done then, of course.

„That is why the president is so anxious. Colquhoun is already there. A start must be made within the month. That is why we went to the expense of having a special steamer sent here to take you back.”

There was a short silence. Both men watched me covertly. I believe that they reckoned upon my resolution giving way in the face of their quietly professed ultimatum.

This offer was amazing enough, it is true, but in the face of my cable and letter from London it was not possible to doubt its genuineness.

There remained that single moment of betrayal on the part of these two men when I mentioned Miss Hoyt's name. Yet what did that amount to? I knew nothing myself of Miss Hoyt. Beautiful women have been on the wrong side before now. So I sat reasoning the matter out, and presently Anthony drew from his pocket a roll of papers.

„I am a bungler“; he declared, with a charming air of candor. „For the moment I had forgotten that this was strictly a matter of business. Even among those who know nothing of commerce these things of course have to be put on a proper basis. Here is your formal appointment, sealed and signed. The president and the subcommittee have passed the terms which I offered you.“

I glanced through the agreement. It appeared to be in scrupulous order. „You have only to put that in your pocket,“ Anthony said, „and the thing is done.“

I placed it upon the table with a sigh of regret.

„It is just what I cannot do,“ I said, firmly but with reluctance. „My word is passed to sail on the Argonaut. If you can suggest any means whereby I can do this and accept your offer, well and good. If not—well, I can only try to express to you my most profound regret.“

They were satisfied at last that I was not to be moved. Anthony rose to his feet.

He caught up the key and moved toward the door, swinging it lightly on his forefinger. I followed him, and behind came Gorrino. He fitted the key into the lock, but seemed unable to make it turn. It seemed to me that he was trying to turn it the wrong way.

„Let me do it,“ I said, bending forward. „I think I know how it works.“

I bent forward. Almost immediately, and like lightning, an arm was thrown round my neck. I had no time to utter a cry or strike a blow. The speed with which it was done was marvellous.

I was garroted, and my wrists were bound together with a cord which cut deep into my flesh. The thrust must have been made and the knot tied with a single movement. Gorrino came stealthily to my side, and before I could even guess at his purpose a wet silk handkerchief was pressed against my face. The sickening fume of chloroform crept up my nostrils. There followed a buzz in my ears—then darkness.

The rushing of water through my half-opened portholes was the first sound of which I was distinctly conscious. I sat up in my bunk, looked about me in amazement.

A sudden flood of memory came to me. I remembered Anthony and his friend, our interview at the hotel. I had been drugged and brought on board this steamer unconscious. It was incredible, but it was true.

Then I sprang from my bunk in a towering rage. I tore on my coat and waistcoat, and without waiting for tie or collar I pushed aside the sheet which hung in front of my door and hastened upon deck.

And face to face with me in a suit of spotless ducks and smoking a cigarette of Havana tobacco was Anthony.

„What the devil is the meaning of this?“ I exclaimed. „How dare you bring me here?“

„My dear Mr. Atherstone, I do not understand. We are only carrying out our last night's arrangements.“

„Don't talk such rubbish,“ I interrupted fiercely. „You and that other blackguard gave me chloroform and got me here somehow, but by heaven you shall suffer for it.“

„But, my dear sir,“ he exclaimed, „you are under some extraordinary illusion. O, I am sure that you are. Last night you agreed to sail with my friend and myself for the purpose of considering a proposition to be laid before you by the minister of the country to which we belong. You were taken ill. We drank, it is true, two magnums of champagne. The night was so hot. But our starting time was fixed, delay was impossible. Consider yourself my dear Mr. Atherstone, the nature of our dilemma.“

„You mean to insinuate, then, that I was drunk,“ I cried fiercely. Anthony was distressed.

„To-morrow,“ he said, „you will surely remember everything. It will be unnecessary for me to explain further.“

„You will have a good deal of explaining to do, my young friend,“ I declared, „when I get you before an English consul.“

„It is so unfortunate,“ he murmured, „but I do not think that there is an English consul where we are going.“

„Now, between you,“ I said, softly, „you must contrive to tell me the truth. Where are we bound for?“

Mr. Anthony shrugged his shoulders.

„My dear sir,“ he said deprecatingly, „why assume that there need be any concealment about it? There should, indeed, be none. We are bound for the Island of Morcaqua!“

„Morcaqua!“ I exclaimed. „And where the mischief is that?“

They looked at one another in well simulated astonishment. Gorrino even raised his fat hands.

„You do not know where Morcaqua is,“ he protested. „Impossible! O, impossible!“

„Geography,“ I remarked, „is not my forte. I must confess that I never heard of the place.“

„It is amazing,“ Gorrino exclaimed, with a leer. „Anthony, do you hear? Our young friend here—he has never heard of Morcaqua, the island of untold riches.“

„Come,“ I said, „let us have no misunderstandings. You have kidnapped me. You are taking me to Morcaqua. What you expect to gain from it I can't imagine. But I want to warn you of this. I'm only a civil engineer, but I belong to a country which doesn't permit these sorts of liberties with her people, and further, although I myself am of no account, I have an uncle who is a cabinet minister, and another in the foreign office. So you see, I am not altogether friendless. I demand that you make for the nearest port of any nation and land me. If you refuse—well, there will be trouble.“

Anthony laid his hand lightly upon my shoulder.

„My dear Atherstone,“ he said, simply, „don't make us feel like jailers. You know what discipline is. Well, we are acting under orders.“

„From whom?“ I demanded.

„From one whose acquaintance you will soon make,“ he answered.

„Let me know his name,“ I insisted.

The two gentlemen exchanged glances. It was Gorrino who answered me.

„Why not?“ he exclaimed. „Why not, indeed. It is indeed Morcaqua whom we serve. It is the ruler of Morcaqua to whom we are taking you.“

They left me, and I walked to the side of the steamer and leaned over the rail. Jamaica was now but a blue mist, that far away trail of black smoke upon the horizon might very well be the ARGONAUT.

Who was Miss Hoyt? Who was the ruler of Morcaqua? What could possibly induce him to believe that I should be willing to work for him after an outrage so gross as this?

The philosophy of youth reasserted itself. I resigned myself to wait for events, and remembered that I was hungry. I descended the stair to my stateroom, and completed my toilet.

In the saloon Anthony and Gorrino received me with effusion. The coffee was good. The breakfast which was set before me excellently cooked. My hosts made somewhat laboured efforts at sustaining a conversation which should contain no references to the peculiarities of our position.

The humour of the thing for the first time began to dawn upon me. Anthony and Gorrino joined boisterously in the laugh which I was no longer able to repress.

I lit a cigarette, and looked thoughtfully into the cloud of blue smoke.

„On deck,“ Gorrino declared, suavely, „it is verra hot. Have you informed our honored guest, my dear Anthony, that his luggage is in the stateroom next to the one in which he this morning found himself?“

„My luggage!“ I exclaimed, incredulously. „What luggage?“

„You give us credit,“ Anthony said, softly, „for very little consideration. We wish your journey and your stay in Morcaqua to be as comfortable as possible. We consequently arranged for the whole of your luggage which was at the docks waiting shipment on the Argonaut to be transferred here.“

I made my way amidships. To my surprise the whole of my belongings were there, packed in an empty stateroom.

However, I unpacked a few things, found out the bathroom, and changed into a suit of white duck. Then I went up on deck, with an armful of books, and promptly dropped them all over the place. For coming along the deck towards me was Miss Hoyt.

I found a deck chair, and spread it out for her.

„Come,“ I said, „you will at least be able to tell me many things which I am anxious to know. It seemed to cause you no surprise to see me here. I, on the other hand, am amazed to see you.“

She looked nervously around her.

„Never mind the chair,“ she said. „We shall be interrupted in a moment. Have you mentioned my name to them.“

„I believe that I did—to Anthony.“

„I was afraid so. You see that awning and rope? I am to keep to my own deck cabin, and the little space in front of it. These may be the only words we shall have alone together during the voyage. Listen! Is there any way in which I can help you?“

„Shall I need help?“ I asked. „I am going no further with these men than the first port we land at. I scarcely see what difficulty I can have in getting away.“

She looked at me in faint pity.

„You underrate the cunning of these men,“ she said. „Morcaqua is a desolate island in a wholly unfrequented route. There will be no one to whom you can appeal. A letter to your friends I might try to dispatch.“

„If you would really do me a service,“ I said, „for heaven’s sake relieve my curiosity. I am utterly bewildered when I ask myself what possible object these men can have in making a prisoner of me like this. What use can they expect to make of me?“

„Do not ask me,“ she begged. „You will find out soon enough.“

„At least tell me—do they expect me to work for them?“

„Assuredly. That is why you are being taken there.“

„And you?“ I asked. „What have you to do with such people as these?“

„Don't ask me,“ she begged. „Only remember what I have said. These men will take you to Morcaqua. Be on your guard when you meet their master. Do not trust him.“

„The intercourse between us is not likely to be a very friendly one,“ I said. „But let my affairs go for the moment. Let me ask you this. Shall I see you in Morcaqua?“

„Probably as much as you desire to,“ she answered. „I have not been allowed to take such a journey as this for years, and if he ever knows that I tried to warn you against coming I shall never be allowed to leave the island again.“

„From me,“ I assured her, „he never will. At least, if I am to see something of you, life in Morcaqua cannot be all misery.“

„When you see the part which I have to play,“ she murmured, „you will forget that little speech.“

„I wish I could persuade you to the contrary,“ I said. „Nothing could lessen my pleasure in being allowed to see you now and then.“

„You should not say that,“ she said. „You know nothing of me. I can make no real difference to you.“

„Promise me your friendship, and I shall be almost reconciled to losing my holiday, and to this extraordinary adventure.“

„You had better be careful,“ she said, quietly. „Do you know that I am supposed to be acting as a sort of decoy? They have lost confidence in me for some reason, but that was my original position.“

„I am willing,“ I assured her, „to be decoyed. If you say the word I will give my parole and come to Morcaqua.“

„I will not say it! If you have the slightest chance of escape, seize it. If you can avoid coming to Morcaqua, even at the risk of your life—take that risk. Remember my words. Be silent now.“

Barely a moment had passed before Anthony’s soft voice sounded in our ears.

„So you two have met before. It is, perhaps, the renewal of an old acquaintance?“

„Miss Hoyt and I met at the government house at Jamaica,“ I said. Anthony bowed.

„The carpenters are busy with your awning,“ he said, turning to her, „and need your instructions. Will you allow me to make a suggestion—if Mr. Atherstone will excuse us?“

She followed him across the deck, and presently he returned alone.

„It is very fortunate,” he said, „that you are already acquainted with Miss Hoyt.”

„Why so?” I asked.

„Surely you know,” he said, „it is Miss Hoyt’s father who is so anxious to have the honour of making your acquaintance.”

Early on the fifth morning of our voyage I awoke in my berth with a peculiar sense of stillness, the cause of which was readily apparent. The engines had stopped.

I dressed and hurried on deck. On the port side of the steamer was what looked to be a barren rock of an island, ornamented with a fringe of scanty herbage. Anthony, with a quiet smile, extended his hand toward it.

„Welcome,” he said, „to Morcaqua!”

„What in the name of all that is marvellous,” I said, „can I have been brought here for?”

A soft voice from behind answered me.

„You will know very soon.”

I turned around. Margaret Hoyt was by my side.

„You will know very soon now,” she said. „Look, the pinnace is coming out for us.”

„The sooner the better,” I answered.

„In which case,” Anthony remarked suavely, “you will perhaps be so good as to see that your luggage is ready for transport to the island.”

„Do you really mean,” I asked, „that I am expected to land upon that rock?”

„Without doubt,” Anthony answered coolly. „Mr. Hoyt is awaiting you there with impatience. We are almost a day behind time.”

In a very short time Miss Hoyt and I were seated side by side in the stern seat of the pinnace.

„You have told me nothing about your father,” I remarked, as we drew near to the landing place.

She looked at me again as she had looked on the balcony of the government house. Again I was conscious of potent things unsaid. I asked her no more questions. Only just before we landed her fingers sought mine for a moment.

I am not sure whether at that moment I would have exchanged my seat in that little boat for the empty stateroom in the ARGONAUT plowing her way homeward.

My introduction to Margaret’s father was in some respects a curious one. She herself led me to him, and I saw at once from his instinctive movement in my direction, and the curious poise of his head, that he was blind.

„Father,” she said, bending over him and kissing him lightly upon the forehead. „Mr. Atherstone is here. I had no share in bringing him, as the others will doubtless tell you. If he had taken my advice he would not be here. I will leave you alone.”

Mr. Hoyt extended a very white hand toward me, but he did not rise from his seat. By the side of his basket chair stood a pair of crutches.

„You are welcome to Morcaqua, Mr. Atherstone,” he said, in a rich bass voice. „I am delighted that my emissaries were able to prevail upon you to pay us this visit.”

„Their persuasions,” I remarked, „consisted chiefly of a locked door and a chloroformed handkerchief. I have been brought here a prisoner, Mr. Hoyt. I am naturally anxious to know for what reason.“

„You are joking, of course, my dear sir. The very suggestion of such means of compulsion sounds prehistoric.“

„What do you want of me?” I asked, bluntly.

„You shall hear,” he said. “You are a junior member of a great firm of engineers, and I am informed that a branch of your business is devoted to mining. You may wonder why I have chosen to make a summer home in what seems to be a very barren island. I will tell you. It is because these few miles of soil contain the richest gold mines in the world.“

I looked around me incredulously.

„Impossible,” I exclaimed. „There is not the slightest trace of auriferous soil.”

„Appearances,” he murmured, „are so deceptive. You will change your opinion, I am sure. Do me the favour to read this.“

He handed me a few sheets of manuscript paper pinned together. I glanced them through. The language was cold and studied enough, but the story they told was Arabianesque.

It was a wonderful report of the Morcaquan gold mine, but it was unsigned. I laid it down with a little laugh.

„It is,” I said, „a marvellous work of imagination.“

„It will sound better,” he remarked, „when your name is at the foot.”

I stared at him for a moment in blank amazement. Then the situation began to dawn upon me.

„You had better,” he suggested, „for form’s sake make a brief investigation of the island. I will send for my daughter. She shall accompany you.“

He struck a bell, and a coloured servant came out, whom he dispatched in search of Margaret. She came at once, in a cool white linen dress, and swinging a large sun hat.

„I want you to show Mr. Atherstone round the island,” Mr. Hoyt directed.

She beckoned to me to follow her. When we were out of sight she turned, and I saw that her eyes were full of tears. „You understand?“

„Perfectly,” I answered. „I think that we will not waste our time looking for gold.”

„I am so sorry,” she said.

„It is not your fault,” I answered, “and I think that I would rather be here than on the ARGONAUT, after all.”

„Well,” Mr. Hoyt remarked, lifting his head as we approached.

„There is not an ounce of gold upon the island,” I said.

Mr. Hoyt motioned to Margaret, and she left us.

„I will give you £20,000,” he said, „to sign that report.”

„If your condition,” I answered, „did not prohibit such measures, I should punch your head.”

He smiled.

„Exactly the answer I expected,” he remarked. „Well, we shall save the money. The Press is a great power. By now it is announced in England that you have left Jamaica for the Morcaqua gold mine. That is quite sufficient for us. The signature

which will adorn this report may not be yours, but I promise you that it will be a very fair imitation. I only regret," he added with a faint smile, "that it will be necessary for you to become my guest here for some time.

"Franks," he called, "my crutches."

I saw servants on their way to the little harbour with luggage, and Mr. Hoyt was himself evidently prepared for a journey.

"You mean to leave me here?" I exclaimed.

"It is regrettable, but necessary," he answered.

I was unarmed, but in any case resistance would have been absurd. There were at least a dozen men waiting for a signal from him.

An hour later there was nothing to be seen of the steamer but a thin line of smoke upon the horizon.

"Miss Hoyt!"

I stopped short and stared at her in amazement. It had never occurred to me for one moment that there was the slightest chance of her having been left to share my imprisonment. Besides, I had seen her trunks go down to the beach, and herself in their wake.

Yet here she sat in a shady corner of the veranda, a book upon her lap, her dark eyes inscrutable as ever raised to mine.

"Well," she said, quietly.

"I don't understand," I faltered. "Has the steamer come back? Has your father changed his mind?"

"My stepfather," she said, "does not change his mind. The steamer was out of sight hours ago."

"But I saw you in the pinnace—and all your luggage."

She smiled faintly.

"I have had to sacrifice my wardrobe," she remarked, "but I had never any intention of leaving the island unless I was obliged—with them."

My imprisonment seemed no longer a terrible thing. It was amazing what a change had come over everything.

"What will they say when they know?" I asked.

"My stepfather—will be annoyed," she remarked calmly. "They will not know, however, until tomorrow. My maid is on board, and she will keep my door locked. My father knows that I am a bad sailor."

"Will they come back, do you think?" I asked with sudden fear.

"I think not," she answered. "Mr. Hoyt is too anxious to get to England."

"I believe you stayed for fear any harm should come to me," I ventured boldly.

"Perhaps I did," she admitted, flashing a sudden look at me. "Are you not gratified?"

"More than that," I declared; "I am reconciled."

She looked at me coldly.

"It is possible," said she, "that your detention here may not be as long, after all, as my stepfather thinks. You have very good friends in Jamaica, and they will know something of your disappearance."

„It seems to me,” I answered, „that I have a very good friend here. If I was not a perfect idiot your first warning would have been sufficient to keep me out of this scrape.“

She smiled.

„You admit that it is a scrape, then?”

„I admit nothing of the sort,” I declared. „I would rather be here at this moment than on the ARGONAUT.”

„I am afraid, after all, that you are a very foolish person,” she said. „I shall go away and leave you. It is too hot to be out of doors.“

„I am quite sure that you are a very tantalizing one,” I answered. „When shall I see you again?”

„Perhaps—at dinner,” she said. „In the meantime,” she added, more seriously, „have nothing more to say than you can help to the servants, and keep your revolver in your pocket. I do not think that they would dare to try and harm you, but it is as well to run no risks.“

I lit a cigar, and appropriated her vacant chair. It was astonishing how everything had changed with me. I could think of Mr. Hoyt and the trick which he had played me with positive amusement. This barren rock of an island had suddenly become to me the most desirable place in the world.

Later on I felt even more at peace with my absent host. Something of a sybarite himself, he had left behind him his cook with generous instructions for my comfort. Margaret came down to dinner in a white muslin gown, and if a little informal, our meal was none the less delightful. Afterwards we went out into the deep, cool darkness, and she beckoned me to follow her.

„Let us climb up the hill,” she said. „We shall get a breeze there.“

Once she let me help her over a difficult place, and as her hand touched mine I tried to draw her to me.

„Margaret!” I murmured.

She snatched her hand away, and flitted along the path at such a pace that I had hard work to keep anywhere near her. When I reached the summit I found her looking intently seaward. She stretched out her hand.

„Look,” she said, softly, “is that phosphorus—or is it a light?”

It was hard to say. It was hard to believe, too, that I was utterly indifferent.

„Margaret,” I said, „I must—I must tell you something.”

„It is a light,” she exclaimed suddenly. „Look!”

It was certainly a ship’s light, and as though to make assurance a certainty there came to us as we stood there the sound of a gun booming over the water.

„I knew that they would send for you,” she said. „After all, you see, Mr Atherstone, your imprisonment has not been a long one.”

„It has not been imprisonment at all,” I answered.

„You will be able to leave at daybreak,” she said, cheerfully.

„I shall not leave at all,” I answered, boldly, „unless you come too.”

„You are absurd,” she protested.

I felt for her hand. It rested passively in mine.

„You will come, Margaret,” I begged.

„I—I suppose I must,” she faltered.

Then I took her into my arms and I blessed Mr. Hoyt and all his schemes.

It was exactly two months and a day before I saw Mr. Hoyt again. At 7:15 on a dull, cold morning, I stood on the dock at Liverpool, watching the passengers leave the great liner which had just arrived.

At last I saw them come down the gangway. Anthony in front and Gorrino behind helping Mr. Hoyt. I accosted them at once.

„Welcome to England, Mr. Hoyt,” I said.

Gorrino shook like a jellyfish, and Anthony stared at me as one might at a ghost. Mr. Hoyt alone received the blow of my presence with perfect composure.

„You are a wonderful man—or a very lucky one, Mr. Atherstone,” he said.

„There is a boat leaving for New York in two hours,” I answered.

„An admirable suggestion,” Mr. Hoyt declared. „By-the-bye, I am really curious to know how you got here.”

„Your daughter left a note for Sir John Marsham, to be opened in case I did not leave by the ARGONAUT,” I told him. „A government sloop came for me.”

He nodded his head slowly.

„I ought to have thought of that,” he murmured.

„Your daughter”; I added, “is now my wife, so you see I am not afraid to tell you the truth. Might I suggest—”

I pointed to the dock, towards which the people were already hurrying. Mr. Hoyt nodded thoughtfully.

„My dear son-in-law,” he said, „I wish you every happiness. Pray convey the same message to Margaret. Anthony! Gorrino!”

They moved down the landing stage, a strange, dejected-looking trio. I saw them off and Mr. Hoyt repeatedly waved his hat to me. Then I returned to breakfast with Margaret.

