

PACIFIC ROMANCE.

(From the Argonaut.)

By all the laws of the true romance she should have felt upon opening her eyes a premonition that this was to be a day of destiny. But she merely felt that the engines had stopped, that the ship was at anchor, and that, therefore, it was moistly, insufferably warm. The curtains across the stateroom windows did not so much as move. She came down from her berth and pulled them aside. The coast of Guatemala was before her—and the port of San Jose.

There had been rain in the night, a tropic shower. The clouds were lifting away. They were massed in white and gold behind the two volcano peaks that had sent forth the one fire, the other water, in their time. And the peaks themselves were side by side, two cones of glowing pink.

They were miles inland, many miles, and the thick, lush tropic green was between, reaching to the curve of the sand. There were some white houses by the beach—white with red tiles. They made the port of San Jose. But the ship was anchored well out in deep water, and there were no craft in sight save a rowboat or two drawn up on the sand, and one that was starting out from the pier across the faint blue water that showed back the clouds of white and gold. The wake and the oars glistened in the new sunlight.

The girl leaned her bare arm on the sill and stood looking out. She had seen many beautiful things in her life, but never so lovely as the coast and volcano peaks of San Jose de Guatemala at the break of day.

The rowboat came near and she saw that the quarantine officials sat in the stern. But by the time she was dressed and came on deck they had long since gone. There was not one at all in sight either aft or midships, but when she was forward of the bridge she saw someone standing near the bow. He was a new passenger. He turned and looked at her.

There was a breeze, the faintest South Sea morning breeze, that rippled her thin white gown and moved the loose tendrils of her hair. He raised his straw hat civilly and turned back to his consideration of the shore. Presently the purser joined him, and he stood talking, his hands jammed into his sack coat pockets and his tan shod feet wide apart on the deck. Then he went into the saloon.

That was all Miss Strathmore saw of him but she described him to her mother accurately, nevertheless.

"He's the only Latin ever I saw who looked as though he could do things—and hot talk about it afterward. His skin is very white and his hair is black. His nose is big and his jaw shuts hard. And, moreover—though his eyes are brown, they are neither sparkling or soft"—she objected to both—"they are level and hard. That he may speak English is my fondest wish."

He did. He was put beside her at breakfast and the captain presented him. His name was Merida.

"You saw me this morning," he said, "when I was looking back upon my house my home, my heritage, my lands."

"And 'the laughing dames in whom you did delight'?" she followed up.

He gave her a quick look. "Perhaps," he said, and turned short about to talk to the man on the other side, a little Chilean whom Miss Strathmore did not like. They talked Spanish together, and she could not understand. So she ate her breakfast and wondered why the Guatemalan should have objected to have his quotation finished out. Had she hit some nail too neatly on the head? He had risked that. But he knew his Byron, apparently, and his English had not so much as an accent. If there was to be any further conversation it lay with him to begin it. He did so presently, but he kept to generalities, and refused to be drawn out about himself.

The captain was more communicative on the subject later on. He belonged to the general seadog type. "Better make up to young Merida, Miss Elizabeth," he advised, coming to a stop in front of her stateroom chair. "He owns about everything in sight over there," his arms swept the view of dense green from the beach curve to the mountains far away. "Half Guatemala belongs to his brother and him. The brother is married—to a Spanish princess, too—but he's not, and you'll do the best two weeks' work you ever did in your life if you catch him between here and 'Frisco Bay.'"

The captain liked the topic, evidently. He drew up a stool and sat down to pursue it further, growing from the jocose to the serious.

He would recommend Matcho Merida. He wasn't like the rest of these Black and Tans. "He's made this trip with me six times now, and I've watched him close. He don't go in for the things that most of his breed do—cards and women and wine." (Miss Strathmore thought of her quotation.) "We get the chance to see things on these ships, you bet, but I've never seen Merida do a fool thing yet. It may be because he's been to school in England, and runs the New York City of affairs for their finesse, but why ever it is, it's so. And educated!" he added,

awe inspiredly, "why, that fellow speaks four languages as well as he does his own—and got something to say in all of them. You mind what I say, Miss Elizabeth. I knew your father when I was a boy, and the best I could wish for his daughter would be to marry young Merida." He stood up and started off. "Here he comes now. Get him to tell you how he and the other young bloods held the Governor's palace against a revolutionist mob for a day and a night. Make up to him."

Which—the advice and the strategy—had the natural effect of rendering Miss Strathmore more barely civil to Merida when he stopped to speak to her. He had changed the suit in which he had come on board and was in white flannels now.

"He's not handsome," she decided, remembering the regular features of other Spanish blooded males she had known, "but he's quite the most swaggy individual I ever saw."

He pulled up a wicker chair beside her, and they began to talk. It was 10 o'clock then. They were still talking when the luncheon gong sounded at one. They went down together and talked through the meal.

If Miss Strathmore had been stupid she would have stayed on deck the rest of the afternoon. As it was she went to the cabin for a nap, and then devoted herself—the least in the world, obviously—to her mother, until dinner time. But there was the evening after that. They spent it together in the bow and talked—of the phosphorus and things.

It was not until after a good many nights that they got to anything much more personal. Then it came all at once. Merida stood wedged into the extreme point of the bow and Miss Strathmore sat half overhanging the black ocean when the prow cut into the gold light. She was holding fast to a stay. She could just see Merida's face in the starlight, and his eyes were on her steadily. There had been a stop in speech.

"Was I uncivil when you finished my line for me that night?" he asked.

"Rather," Miss Strathmore answered him.

"And you didn't know why. I suppose?"

She admitted that she did not.

"Well," he explained, "it's just this. I get so sick of having people go on the basis that all men down here are—devils of fellows—Don Juans and all that. We get so deucedly much of it."

She reminded him that he had laid himself open to it.

I know I did. But one doesn't expect an American or an Englishman to know his poets—if you don't mind my saying so. I never thought about your going on." There was a pause. "And I don't go in for woman and flirtation," Merida said. "I have never cared for any girl except you."

It was sudden, certainly—so sudden that she let go her hold on the stay. His hand went out to steady her instantly. Then he took it away.

"I suppose you are surprised," he said. "I am myself. But it's true."

Miss Strathmore's self-possession had weathered many experiences, but foundered at this. She did not think of anything to say.

"I don't want to bother," he told her, "and I don't expect you to like me yet—but I hope you will—before long." Then he went off to other things, but conversation was not a success.

They were at anchor off Mazatlan the next day, some two miles out beyond the bar. Merida put in his appearance at breakfast in shore clothes.

"I'm going to land," he told Miss Strathmore, "if the captain will have a boat whistled for me."

"It's rough," she tried to suggest.

"I know it is," he answered, leveling his eyes straight on her for the benefit of all who might choose to see, so that she flushed very pink. "If it were not I should ask you and your mother to go, too." They had done it at Acapulco and Manzanillo before.

"I will not go," observed the Chilean; "it is too much danger to."

Merida caught Miss Strathmore's glance of contempt and nearly smiled.

Toward the middle of the morning a rowboat, whose owners were courageous responded to the signals and ventured out to the ship. Merida went down the Jacob's ladder. The captain watched him.

"You'll come to grief, Matcho, if you don't watch out. See that you're men aren't tequila drunk when you start back. It's pretty bad now, but it'll be rolling like fun then. We'll anchor at 3," he added, warningly.

Merida watched his chance to jump; he caught it expertly and the boat pulled away.

It was 2 o'clock when it reappeared, coming slowly, hidden in a hollow, climbing a crest, flung about through the frothing bar. Miss Strathmore and the captain and a good many others stood watching it. Miss Strathmore had been shooting at driftwood and at a big turtle that was floating on its back in the sun. The captain had been watching her. The turtle was a shifting and difficult mark, but she had hit it three times, and then a boat had put out to bring it in.

"We'll have turtle steaks tomorrow," said the captain; "you're a pretty good shot."

But she had had enough of the amusement

and they were leaning idly against the rail. The captain reverted to Merida.

"Matcho tell you about the palacio?" he asked.

"He won't," she answered; "he says he's forgotten it."

"He isn't much on talk," he said, approachingly. "Hasn't told you about the girl down below on the spardeck, either, I suppose?"

She shook her head.

"Well," said the captain, "she's a little Indian from one of his plantations down there—pretty little devil, too. Seems she's in love with him and he won't look at her. So what does she go and do but scrape the money together somehow and take steerage passage and follow him. She came on at San Jose, but he never knew she was on board until after we got off the Guatemala coast. She's a shy one—and sharp. Then one day when he was down with the doctor looking at the hospital she showed herself, clasped his knees and wept, and all the rest of it—made the dickens' own row. He acted very well, but it put him in a ticklish kind of place. Of course we won't let her up here, and he's mighty careful to keep off the spardeck now. He's going to ship her back from 'Frisco,' he says." He pointed to the back of a black-haired head that appeared over the side directly below them. "That's her." Evidently the eyes in the head were watching the boat, too.

"She's seen you with him and she don't like you a little bit," the captain chuckled. "She calls you names."

Miss Strathmore did not think it amusing at all. The rowboat was near. Miss Strathmore met Merida's eye.

"He'll have a scramble of it getting up," the captain opined.

The ship was rolling heavily.

"And his Mexicans," said the captain uneasily; "by heaven, they're half drunk, too. Look at their eyes."

Whether it was that or not, it was certain that they could not seem to manage to keep the boat alongside long enough for Merida to catch the platform, when the ship rolled down.

"Take your time, Merida," the chief engineer called to him—"take your time."

Apparently the word suggested something to Merida. He put his hand to his watch pocket—and then his face changed. There were three Mexicans in the boat, but only two of them had rowed; the other had been sitting near him in the stern steering occasionally with an oar. Merida said something to this one. The fellow looked too innocent and shook his head. Things happened quickly after that Merida caught the mozo by the arm, and that began the fight. The rower shipped their oars, and, urged by the excitement and the tequila, joined in. The boat pitched and plunged.

"They'll kill him," the captain called out. "Lower away a boat."


"If they've no knives—" began the purser. But as he said it a knife was thrown, and by the little Indian girl on the deck below.

The captain swore one oath. "They'll do him now—sure," he said.

Merida had his man by the throat, but he was down and all three were atop of him. One of them jumped up and caught the knife by the handle as it came, dexterously. He gave it to the man who had Merida under him and the other two drew back. A splendid brown arm, with its hand grasping the knife, rose high and poised about Merida's breast. Then it fell—but uselessly, limp from the shoulder bone. There was smoke in the muzzle of the revolver in Miss Strathmore's hand.

Merida drew the wounded Mexican off, bent over him, felt in his sash, and drew out his own watch. The rowers had resumed their oars. "Now," said Merida, quietly, "you take me alongside."

The little Indian on the spardeck had watched it eagerly, hanging out far over the side. She turned now, twisting around lithely upon her back, her face upturned. Her dark eyes glowed, her lips apart. Miss Strathmore, the revolver still in her hand, was straight above. The Indian drew back her head further still and then laughed. Her right hand went to her forehead and came away again with a sweep, in mock salute—the salute of the matador who has missed his stroke and forsakes the ring.



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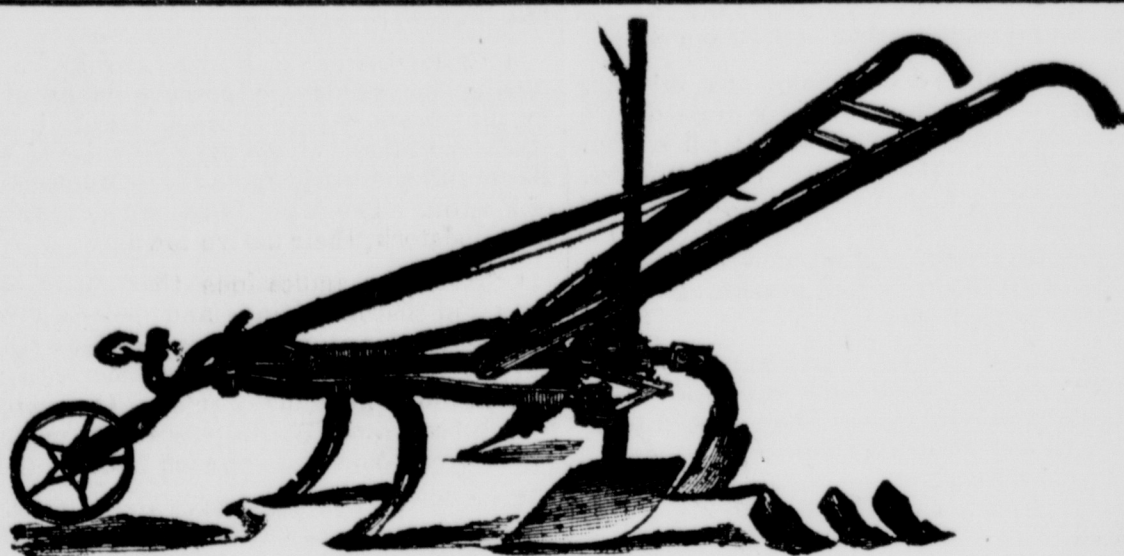
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