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THE DOUBLE CROSS

(Continued.)

She was now, meantime, playing some game—what game? Reyes had said that she had a way of her own and a will of her own in doing things. Reyes was right. She had.

"Senorita," I said, starting toward the trail, "I will say adios now and go away."

I said this only to see what she would do.

"Impossible, senor," was her astounding statement. "You are virtually a prisoner of my father's people, the Aztecs."

"How?"

"If Vallejo saw you take that kiss he will tell the Aztecs, who will deal to you the fate of the kiss-stealer of the Hotel Silao."

She lowered her voice as she added:

"For three centuries the Aztecs of La Puz de whom Vallejo is now the chief, have worked for the de Gasteneda family. Our honor is our pride. Should you attempt to fly now, Vallejo would flash word to the Aztecs and they would spring up about you as out of the ground. They would intercept your flight, compel you to account for that kiss. No, you cannot leave this region now. My lips were bait in a trap. You are caught."

"Happy captivity," I said. "May I never know freedom again, Felipa mia," I went on familiarly, as she led the way to Vallejo. "There is going to be trouble here, that is plain. All the same I shall win this game which you are compelling me to play—and you yourself will be the prize."

She looked at me again in wonderment.

"Listen to me, John St. John," she said, with sudden gravity. "That kiss—it cannot be lightly dismissed. It is in my mind. I must think. And you—you must let me manage this thing in my own way. Will you?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "I've been told that you would insist upon putting this thing through by your own methods—original, unconventional, even daring."

"Who told you? That dreadful man—the Senor Tony? He tried to—oh, never mind. Not for my life would I be seen alone with him, senor, as with you, here and now."

"Tony Terry? You call him Tony?"

"It is the custom in Mexico, senor, to address our guests by their first names—like your Quakers."

"Then you will call me—Jack?"

"Senor Juan—before the night is over I will plan a plan—for saving your life and my name. Will you then comply with my wishes?"

"Yes," I assented. "And we will win this game all right. Is it only a game with the Aztecs—or with—what? I say we'll win because you will—at your own pleasure and in your own time, give me the sign you were going to give me on the steamer—the sign of the cross."

She stood still, grew pale, trembled from head to foot.

"What's the matter?" I cried, taking hold of her arm, purposely, above the elbow.

With a shudder she wrenched her arm away—in a movement she might have made had I touched her arm with a red-hot branding-iron.

"The sign of the cross!" she whispered, looking at me aghast. "What do you know of the cross?"

"Oh, very little. It is much more of a mystery to me than to you. Yes?"

She turned her head away, regained her composure, then murmured:

"It is all a mystery to me, too—all."

"In the name of God, Felipa," I cried, "why do you pretend not to know me? Why do you not admit, right now and have done with all this mystery—that you are the woman trained and destined to be my mate?—and that we are actually betrothed—"

"I suppose," she said, with a smile that revealed two rows of wondrous teeth, "that it would be just as well to let the Aztecs think—that."

CHAPTER XI. ...

SENOR EL CAPTAIN JOAQUIN RUIZ.

We reached the 'Gobe hut where Vallejo, the watchman, stood in the door.

"Buenos dias" (good-day) Felipa said, in greeting the Aztec. "You have been watching 'de man hunt, hombre, yes?" she asked, by way of

inserting a verbal probe into the situation, obviously determined either to confirm her fears or to relieve her anxiety at once.

The girl gave me a look that said as plainly as words:

"He lies."

"Can you give us some coffee, Vallejo?" she said. "The Senor el Americano is hungry."

"Hunger, senorita," observed the inscrutable peon, of the prehistoric face, "puts the mouth to honorable use."

At this I laughed, but Felipa looked very solemn.

She suggested that I take a look at the shaft of the Farthermost mine.

"According to your telegram, senor," she said, "this is the mine that gives us the honor of your company."

"This, then, is your father's land?"

"Yes. And north, east and west as far as the eye can reach. My father has six other mines. This seventh one cannot be worked with profit—by our primitive methods. But—this region resembles your own Out-West, yes? I wish I might have seen more of the States, on my way to and from Spain. I am half American."

She noted my look of inquiry.

"Yes, my mother was an American. And on the night of my birth—she died, under circumstances most mysterious."

Instead of qualifying this last remark, as I hoped she would, she said:

"See how primitively our mines are worked—just the same as three hundred years ago. One is lashed to the end of this rope, and is lowered down eight hundred feet—like a bucket into a well—and, as you descend, the rope getting longer and longer, you swing from side to side of the shaft, like the pendulum in the pit of your Edgar Allen Poe."

After giving me further information about the dangers and even the terrors of the descent into the mine, she said:

"And listen, senor. Had I really wished, Amore to escape, I would have ordered Vallejo to lower him down the shaft. In the mine, where there is neither food nor water, even the Rurales would not think of conducting a man hunt. Amore would have been safe. For we do not work this particular mine, you know."

Vallejo now brought the coffee, in earthen cups. After drinking it, I said:

"Shall we ride on now?"

"No!" decisively. "We will wait for Swastika. Surely you, of all the men I know, will concede that a duena is a safeguard and a—"

She stopped, then added:

"Your women in the States kiss and hate. And your men—"

"Our men?"

"In a sidelong glance she marked my smile, and into her eyes came the first spark of coquetry.

"Your men, senor, kiss and laugh."

"That kiss, senorita, enriched me while it did not impoverish you. I am Dick Turpin. I rob only heiresses."

"A kiss in Mexico," she said, "can have only one meaning."

"What is that?"

"Serious consequences," she answered, looking very grave.

"The altar?" I suggested.

"Look!

She pointed down the trail to a cloud of dust.

"It is the diligencia," she announced.

We were silent a moment, and then:

"Save my father, senor, no man has ever kissed me. No other—not even my Joaquin."

"I have heard of your Captain Joaquin Ruiz," I said.

"My father," she said, looking at me defiantly, "has long wished me to marry—Joaquin. Until recently he was military aide to our President. You shall meet him. He comes today with his regiment, the Black Cavalry, to camp near the hacienda—for the annual manoeuvres. He is broad of shoulder and straight and strong—and very fierce in his devotions."

(To Be Continued.)

THE "INDEPENDENCE" OF THE MONTREAL STAR

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1900—Opposed Laurier. Ostensible reason: British connection endangered.

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