PICARO

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CHARLES NORDHOFF

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PÍCARO

To the Skipper
HARRISON W. SMITH, ESQ.,
of the South Seas
of Boston and of Borneo

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CHAPTER ONE

The horizon was cloudless that evening, and over the ocean, beyond the ridge of Toros Point, a glimmer of daylight lingered in the sky. The gorges of the San Benito Hills were filled with a purplish haze; little by little, with a change relentless and imperceptible as the approach of age, purple shadows turned gray and gray turned black, while the afterglow illuminating the summits of the range faded and was swallowed up in the dusk.

The valley leading inland from the bay was odorous with the moist, subtle perfume of bottom land; the air trembled faintly as the thunder of the breakers drifted in from the beach beyond the marshes of La Balsa. Scattered cows and calves, lying under the cottonwoods along the creek, lifted their heads when a night breeze stole down from the hills, rustling the leaves of the old trees and bringing from the uplands the sweet mingling scents of tarweed and black sage. A planet glimmered in the west, paling as the sky line of the range hardened against a growing radiance. Presently the moon rose, revealing in the glamour of its deceptive light the sheltering point, the calm waters of the bay, the gleaming salt pools of the marsh, the broad valley with its pasture land and groves of cottonwood, and the old Spanish house of the Rancho Guadalupe.

Even by day the square and massive house was beautiful; in the moonlight, which softened its severity of line and veiled the symptoms of ruin in a cracked wall or an area of plaster fallen away, it had an air of singular accord and dignity, akin to the beauty of the hills, of the valley, of the sleeping bay. It was a relic of a forgotten age, when men built slowly with the materials which lay at hand—building for their own lifetimes and to shelter their children after them.

At the far end of the gallery, beyond the carved doors giving on the entrance hall and the court, a bench stood with its back to the wall. The servants of the household were gathered there in the shadows, whispering with a kind of subdued excitement among themselves. There were no lights in the reception room, but the glimmer of a lamp behind thick silken hangings outlined the windows of Doña Margarita’s room beyond. The night was warm and the double doors of her husband’s study were thrown back to admit the air. A student lamp with a green shade burned on the major’s table, and its light, shining out through the doorway, illuminated a floor of smooth flagstones, a pair of short square columns, and the round arch above.

Close to the table, in the circle of lamplight, an old man lay stretched in an easy-chair. He wore a smoking-jacket over a soft white shirt with a flowing tie. His face was tanned by a lifetime in the open; his blue eyes, under heavy

brows, had the veiled gaze which tells of years in the saddle or at sea. The high-bridged nose fitted the firm mouth and chin; the thick hair, allowed to grow long in the fashion of an earlier day, was white as his mustache or the wisp of goatee beneath his lower lip. In spite of his hollow temples and the veins in the thin brown hand holding an unlighted cigar, Major Blaise Langhorne seemed to have escaped the senility which comes to most men of his age. A remarkably handsome old man, you would have said, a man of decision still—kindly, resolute, and conservative to the last drop of his blood.

There was a knock on the door of the dressing-room which separated the study from Mrs. Langhorne's apartment. The major rose from his chair with a look of anxiety, sudden and sharp.

"Come in, Robert," he said.

The door opened and Doctor Tisdale entered the room—a young man with rimless pince-nez and a worn, clever face. He felt a certain awe in the presence of Langhorne, his father's ancient friend, who seemed precisely the same courtly old gentleman he remembered in the days of visits to the Langhorne boys, many years before.

"I might as well be frank, sir," he said in a dull voice, after a moment of hesitation. "There is no more hope."

The old man drew in his breath; he had been preparing for the doctor's words, but all the day's happenings had seemed unreal: the sudden crisis of his wife's illness, the scarlet stains on the handkerchief she had striven to hide, the doctor summoned by telegram . . . an unpleasant dream from which he must presently awake to the tranquillity of yesterday. An instant later, when he spoke, his voice was even and firm.

"Sit down, my boy," he suggested kindly; "you must be tired. You're quite sure there is no hope?"

The doctor did not raise his eyes. The old man's self-control had almost broken his own—worn thin at the bedside of the woman who had been his mother's friend. His sensitive lips twitched with the effort to speak.

"She may live till daylight," he replied, "but this is her last night of life. The priest is with her, though she's unconscious now. I think, as I told you before, that it would be best if none of you came in until the end. I'm glad we sent Rita off with Pícaro in the car. I must go back. Please believe me, sir—I know how hard this is for you! If Mrs. Langhorne regains consciousness, I'll come for you at once." The door closed softly behind the doctor's back.

Without seeming aware of what he did, the major took up a knife from the table, cut the end of a fresh cigar, and struck a match. Then, clasping his hands behind him, he walked slowly to the door and across the gallery till he stood under the arch in the warm light of the lamp—gazing with unseeing eyes down the valley and out beyond the marshes and the bay to the Pacific, slumbering in

the moonlight.

At the other end of the gallery an old negro rose from the bench where the servants were whispering, and moved toward his master at a shuffling walk. His eyes were dim; his head was fringed with kinks of snowy wool; his body was bent with age and twisted with rheumatic pains. As he advanced he tapped the floor with a heavy gold-headed cane. Langhorne heard the sound and turned when his old body servant halted behind him, wheezing and short of breath.

"Good evening, Julius," he said in his kindly way.

"Yes sir, Major—good evenin'. 'Scuse me sir. We-all was hopin' Mrs. Langhorne might be easier now."

"Doctor Tisdale says there is no more hope."

"Oh, Major!" The exclamation of sorrow wrung from this humble friend seemed to escape against his will, against a life-long schooling in respect. For a moment the wrinkled black face worked spasmodically; then, with an effort, old Julius composed his features, bowed in a quaint, jerky manner from the hips, bade his master good night, and shuffled back, tapping the flagstones with his cane, to where the other servants awaited him. Fat Concha, Mrs. Langhorne's housekeeper, heaved herself upright as he approached. There was an old feud between them, but to-night, sharing the same sorrow, they had agreed upon a kind of armistice, though Julius, for one, had not forgotten the past. Disregarding the woman's anxiety for news, he settled himself comfortably on the bench and gave the others time to gather about him before he spoke. He cleared his throat.

"Doctor says they ain't no more hope," he informed them at last.

A faint wail went up from the women: "Ay! Ay!" for they were all of Spanish blood.

"Are you sure, old man?" asked Concha, almost fiercely, standing before him with hands on her hips. "Is the doctor sure that Doña Margarita cannot live?"

He nodded solemnly, blinking dim eyes which had filled with the easy tears of his race. "They ain't no hope, I tell you," he muttered, with a kind of mournful relish; "she's a-goin' to die! Times is changin'—me and the major's gettin' old!"

The night was very still. The clock in the study whirred for an instant before it struck eight times, slowly and musically. A girl rose from the bench and went to the dining room at the back of the house, to clear the table where her master's dinner lay untasted and cold.

The sound roused Langhorne from his revery. He turned as the hour struck, entered the room, took a silver key from the mantel, and wound the clock his

wife had given him on their wedding day. Then from a drawer of his desk he took a leather-bound diary and opened it at the entry of yesterday. There were other books like it—a little row of them on the shelf above the desk—dated in neat numerals. He walked to the back of the room and peered through the window at the instruments in their box outside, illuminated by a beam of lamplight. Nearly every night for thirty years the major had noted in his diary the temperature and the reading of the barometer—entries of a certain statistical value in his eyes. His weather forecasts were locally regarded as infallible; in '93 he had given his neighbors a week's warning of the flood. He enjoyed the sudden vivid flashes of memory recalled by glancing over the entries of past years: brief notes on the weather, on the rainfall registered in the old brass gauge behind the house, on the stock, on family affairs . . . laconic paragraphs in the clear, old-fashioned handwriting he had learned as a boy in Charleston, long before the war.

He blotted the fresh entry, closed his diary, turned down the lamp, and walked out into the shadows of the gallery. It was his custom, on sleepless nights, or when there was some problem that needed thinking out, to pace back and forth before his study, stopping from time to time to gaze out at the darkened world of valley and hills and sea from which he seemed to draw reinforcements of spiritual strength. He had always been closer to nature than to mankind. But to-night, even the familiar outlines of the hills seemed unreal. Rita was ill—dying, the young doctor had said in his authoritative way . . . he must accustom himself to the thought of living without her. All his life he had kept a firm grip on realities, but now, for the first time, they eluded him. Rita dying, dead, gone forever from the house, out of his life. It was preposterous, and yet young Robert ought to know his business. If only the elder Doctor Tisdale were alive, such a pronouncement, in his curt voice, would bring a conviction of reality. . . . Langhorne strove to focus his mind on the young doctor, with his pince-nez and manner of authoritative deference, but he seemed remote and shadowy as the major's own boys, Enrique and Blaise. They were not like Rita. He glanced up, half expecting to see her standing in the light of the doorway, her lips parted in a grave smile, and a hand raised in the downward Spanish gesture of beckoning. He could almost hear the soft, clear voice of this silent woman who never wasted words, "Come, *querido mio*; it is late."

She was a De la Torre, the last of the name. In her father, Don Enrique, Langhorne had found a friend after his own heart: a man who never descended to familiarity, who could be cordial without offering or demanding confidences. In these respects, Rita was her father over again, but she possessed, in addition, an inheritance of Latin womanhood; perhaps the fact that Langhorne never wholly understood her moods, never could foretell with

accuracy her reactions to circumstance, had kept him her lover during thirty years of married life.

Thirty years. It seemed only last week that he had paced up and down the gallery on the night when Blaise was born. He had nearly lost her that night. He remembered, with a catch of his breath, how he had halted as the gray-haired doctor stepped out of the study door. It was the first and last time that Tisdale had addressed him by his Christian name; he had even laid a hand on his shoulder. He remembered each word the doctor had spoken: "I oughtn't to ask you this, Blaise. . . . If it comes to a pinch, which shall I save?" "Good God!" he had answered, fiercely, his reserve scattered to the winds. "The child's of no importance!" And he remembered his shame next day—thinking of this utterance blurted out in pain—as he sat beside her in the darkened room, with Enrique, their three-year-old son, on his knee. Lying there pale and worn after her return from the shadows, she had pulled aside the coverlet with a weak hand, and smiled at him as he leaned over to peer at the downy head of his second son. Young Enrique, forgotten for the moment, was struggling to climb on to the bed. "Help him up, Blaise," his wife had said, happily, and Enrique, allowed to touch the new-born child, who waved tiny fists and gazed at the ceiling with dark, unwinking eyes, shouted with delight. Little Blaise's hair fascinated his brother most of all; he began by stroking it wonderingly, and ended with a tentative pull. "*Que pícaro*!" Rita had remarked. "What a rascal! Take him away!" And next morning, when the small boy trotted in to see his mother, she had greeted him with a new name—a name destined to follow him all his days. "Ah, *el Pícaro*! Come and give thy mother a kiss!"

There were no women like Rita nowadays. Old Langhorne thought of his mother, and suddenly his memory skipped back sixty years into the past—to Deux Sevres Plantation, to Charleston, to the flat coast lands of South Carolina. Scenes from the life of his boyhood, from an American past long dead and already more than half forgotten, flashed into his mind: the winters in Charleston, at the old house on Meeting Street, when he walked to school each morning with his Huguenot cousins, the Du Quesnes; Sunday mornings at church, when carriage after carriage, piloted by black coachmen, drew up to unload his schoolmates and their parents, and the ladies came in with rustling silks and a faint perfume of lavender to take their places in the pews; evenings when his father was expected back from Deux Sevres, when the lamps were lit at five o'clock, when he listened for the crunch of carriage wheels on the drive, and ran to fling open the door to welcome his tall father, carrying a gun case and followed by a slave who staggered under a load of wild duck. The figure of his mother moved through his memories—in satin and furs on her way to the Saint Cecilia Society; sitting at his bedside with tired eyes when he lay ill of scarlet fever; in the long kitchen at Deux Sevres, sleeves rolled up and her

skirt protected by a fresh gingham apron as she superintended the black girls at their work. He remembered how eagerly he had awaited the end of school and the beginning of the happy summer on the plantation, when he was free to fish and swim and go boating with his cousins and his boy, Julius. Scene after scene came back to him: the rambling, half-ruined house, with its veranda smothered in honeysuckle; the moonlit nights when he lay awake in his room to hear the mockingbird singing in the magnolia; the pale green of the rice fields; the visits to town in his father's boat manned by slaves—calm summer mornings when he sat beside his mother in the stern and watched the spires and rich foliage of Charleston rise out of the sea. He thought of the hurricane, of the night when his mother had died in childbirth to the wild requiem of the elements; of his young-manhood, the war, his father killed at the head of his regiment, the bitterness of the slow, losing fight. He remembered his last sight of Deux Sevres when Sherman's bummers had laid the country waste and the cause of the South was lost; the rush of sadness, almost of despair, as he realized for the first time the loneliness of human life. All at once the place had become hateful to him—then Blumenthal, the Jew grown rich at running the blockade, had offered to take it off his hands. . . .

For the white-haired man pacing back and forth on the gallery, the present, with its sorrow and anxiety, had ceased to exist. Eagerly, with the half-painful happiness of one revisiting old scenes, he was traveling again over the long road of his life. He saw once more the streets of post-war St. Louis; the new world of the plains, an undulating and limitless ocean of grass, where the sun rose over a horizon scarcely more broken than the line where sea meets sky; the dust of the buffalo herds; the first glimpse of the Rockies, lying like faint blue clouds low in the west. He smelled again the aroma of piñon and scrub-cedar in the broken lands beyond the ranges of the buffalo; felt once more the burning Arizona sun and the thrill of shots exchanged with the Apaches. Ever faster and more vividly old memories came crowding back—the crossing of the Colorado; the scorched desolation to the west; his words with their self-styled guide, and election to the party's leadership; the thirst madness of Julius, and the night when they reached water at Carrizo Creek.

He had sent funds ahead to a bank in San Francisco, and found himself well received by the Southern families already established on the coast. Don Enrique he had met at a ball in one of the Spanish houses, but long before the meeting Langhorne had heard the name of De la Torre—usually mentioned with cordiality, always pronounced with respect. The Spaniard took to the young Confederate officer from the first, and the friendship resulted in Langhorne's purchase of a partnership in the Guadalupe Grant. At that time Rita had been a shy, serious child with dreams of becoming a nun, but as the years went by the American began to realize that love for a woman was

replacing affection for a child. And so the lonely man had made new ties, had taken root in a new and alien soil.

The years after Don Enrique's death had passed happily and tranquilly for Langhorne—the affairs of the ranch prospered, and politics never troubled a man for whom politics had ceased to exist on the day of General Lee's surrender. Only once, when a distant Du Quesne cousin had died destitute, leaving a request that Langhorne look after his orphaned daughter Margaret, had there been any echo from the past. Now she was a tall young girl, almost a woman—and the other Rita, his Rita, lay dying in the room from which the doctor had ordered him. Once again, as on that day so many years ago, he felt the light going from his life, felt that his days of happiness were at an end. Well, the years had taught him one thing: happiness must be paid for with pain, which came inexorably as darkness followed day. Religion was a comfort to women; its teachings were agreeable if one could believe in them, but at bottom the world was a bleak place, with peace neither in this life nor in a rather doubtful life to come. What was that sad French proverb that had stuck in his mind? Ah, yes: "*Tout lasse, tout casse, tout passe.*" . . . That was it—the lives of all the men who had lived since time began, summed up in six short words. . . .

Major Langhorne halted suddenly and stood listening. His ears were undulled by age; he had heard the distant hoarse mutter of Blaise's racing car. He stepped under an arch to gaze down the valley; presently a pair of headlights darted around the turn from the state road, a mile away. The rumble of the exhaust ceased as the car swept up the valley at a pace that proved Blaise's presence at the wheel. The boy was a superb driver—cool, daring, and imbued with his generation's love of speed. A moment later the machine drew up before the gallery and Langhorne was shaking the hand of his younger son, summoned by wire from San Francisco.

Cautioning the two men and the girl to be silent, Major Langhorne led the way past his wife's windows and into the study, ushering them through the door in his courteous, old-fashioned way. When they were seated and Rita had turned up the lamp, he spoke to Blaise.

"I'm glad our wire caught you," he said in a low voice: "Robert is here and he says your mother cannot live another day. She is unconscious now—we must wait until he comes for us."

While the others gazed at the old man with startled eyes, Blaise rose from his chair to light a cigarette. "It was lucky the boy caught me at the hotel!" he remarked. "I was leaving for Tahoe with the Fergusons."

Surprised and displeased, Pícaro looked up at his brother. Major Langhorne's sons had little in common. Blaise was all Spaniard. He had had more success with women than is good for a boy of twenty-four, but men were

apt to distrust him without knowing precisely why. In person he was slender and small boned. His brown hair grew in curls; his features were at once virile and delicate, and the sun had no power to mar the clear olive of his skin. His eyes were not easily forgotten: dark eyes—flecked with gold in certain lights—which seemed unable to focus on objects near at hand. The keenness of his sight was a tradition of the ranch. On horseback or at the end of a dusty motor trip, Blaise always seemed immaculate. He never hurried, never bustled, never fussed; and his manner, languid and tinged with indifference, was irritating to older men.

Pícaro (his friends had nearly forgotten Enrique's Christian name) was of a different type. He had his father's high-bridged nose and strongly marked face; the same steady blue eyes; the same wide shoulders and lean horseman's frame. He was a lover of nature; and a taste for mechanical things fitted the impersonality of his character. The major had sent him to a technical school, where he remained to take his master's degree and where the instructors still spoke of Langhorne's brilliant work. During his summer vacations at home, Rita Du Quesne had been his companion day by day. He had taught the sunburnt little girl to ride, to swim, to sail his boat. One summer had been spent in the east, laboring on the thesis which brought him his degree, and when he came home, with the privilege of writing Master of Science after his name, he found a tall girl of seventeen in place of the small companion he remembered so well. She was almost a woman now—slender and still a little immature, but more desirable than any young girl he had known. Other men must have seen this new Rita . . . he wondered if some callow boy were not already in love with her. A year had passed since that day of home-coming.

Rita was sitting upright in a straight chair—a tall girl with a slender body, delicately and strongly made. Her thick brown hair was tumbled by the wind, and emotion had driven the flush from her face, leaving only the faint bloom of the sun. Her eyes, under dark lashes, were brown and very clear.

The door of the dressing room opened softly and Doctor Tisdale came in. He glanced at Blaise and nodded without smiling. "She is conscious, sir," he said to Major Langhorne as they rose: "I'm afraid this is the end. She's asking for you; the others may come in for a moment."

The lamp was turned low in Doña Margarita's room. A trained nurse stood by the foot of the bed, and a priest with a kindly ruddy face rose from his knees as Major Langhorne appeared. The night was warm, but the last chill was creeping over Mrs. Langhorne, and the nurse had covered her with a tufted quilt of eiderdown. She lay quietly, beyond anxiety or pain. Her dark eyes and the magnificent hair tumbled loosely on the pillow were all that remained of Margarita de la Torre's beauty. The pallor, the hollow cheeks, the wasted throat, told of the ravages of consumption. The doctor was whispering to her

husband. He looked up and made a sign to Blaise.

The younger son walked softly to the bedside, bent over his mother gracefully, smoothed her hair as she smiled up into his eyes, and kissed her for the last time. Pícaro had a fancy that Blaise's shoulders were shaking as he left the room. Rita was next. Her self-control left her as she kissed Doña Margarita's forehead tenderly. Pícaro's own eyes were swimming as he leaned over his mother's wasted form. She turned her head a little to gaze up at him. "My dear son!" she murmured, weakly, in Spanish. "May God keep thee. . . ."

The doctor beckoned to the nurse, took Pícaro's arm, and led him from the room. The priest stood by the bed, and Major Langhorne, blinded by an old man's tears, knelt at his wife's side—face hidden in his arms. The dying woman raised a weak hand to touch her husband's hair. Faintly, beyond the closed door, the clock in the study struck the hour . . . eight—nine—ten—eleven.

CHAPTER TWO

Pícaro's room was at the back of the house—a square, high-ceilinged apartment, with plastered walls and a floor of old red tiles. A pair of windows, protected by gratings of wrought iron on the outside, gave on a view of the upper valley and the distant San Benito Hills. A bedstead with lacings of rawhide under the mattress and posts of carved wood blackened with age, stood in one corner, and beside it a worn bearskin took the place of a rug. The windows were open to admit the warm spring sunshine, and young Langhorne was at work between them, bending over a desk littered with a drawing board, squares, and a case of draftsman's instruments.

The room had been his for nearly twenty years, and it had become a kind of museum, filled with relics of his boyhood—the dusty treasures of youth which betray the tastes of the man. There was a gun rack on the wall above the head of the bed; it supported a pair of repeating rifles and a fowling-piece—the latter a fine English double gun. Mounted heads looked down from the walls: Pícaro's first buck, stalked on the ranch when he was only eleven years old; a brace of antelope with bulging glass eyes, killed with a splendid bighorn ram on a trip across the border into Mexico. Hanging in pairs from the picture rail were specimens of the waterfowl which visited the marshes of La Balsa—mounted during a stage of enthusiasm for taxidermy. Widgeon, teal, mallard, and canvasback were there, with other native fowl which had fallen to his gun, and here and there among them a sportsman might have discerned the forms of rarer visitors—a brace of European widgeon, stragglers from the Old World; a tree-duck strayed north from the swamps of Central America; an Emperor goose from far-off arctic lands. Two framed photographs hung above the desk: one of the handsome dark-eyed mother as she had been a few years before her death, and the other of Rita Du Quesne—a child of ten, smiling and bareheaded, mounted on the spirited pony he had trained for her. There were other pictures on the walls—Major Langhorne in his Confederate uniform; Blaise, the *vaquero*, astride a rearing horse; views of the ranch, of the bay, with Pícaro's sailboat at anchor a stone's-throw from the beach, of old Julius carrying the major's gun and loaded with a great double bunch of duck.

A bookcase was ranged along one wall, and in it Doña Margarita had preserved her son's books, from the early readers, arithmetics, and collections of fairy tales. Many times, when he was away at school, she had come alone to this room to dust and set her boy's possessions in order; it had been her delight, knowing herself unobserved, to turn the worn pages, and to linger, with an emotion known to mothers, over the childish drawings and *graffiti*

with which his school books were adorned. Preserved in this way from the days when he had learned to read, Pícaro's books made an oddly assorted little library—*King Arthur*, *Roland*, *Robin Hood*, the *Chronicles of the Cid*; *María* in Spanish, the classic novel of Latin-America, and beside its worn back a row of titles concerned with natural history and sport. Another shelf was occupied by bound volumes of the *Scientific American*, covering many years, and there were technical books by dozens—textbooks and treatises on physics, on mechanics, on electricity.

Pícaro pushed back his chair with a sigh and lit a pipe. His work was not going well this morning; it seemed impossible to concentrate on the problem he had set himself. His mother's death, a week before, had shaken his world to the foundations, and as yet he had been unable to adjust his thoughts to a life in which she had no part. He had seen little of her during the years of his absence at school and college, but a week had never passed without an exchange of letters—his written as he wrote to no one else, full of his hopes, his plans, his small successes; hers concerned with the details of a tranquil life, and breathing a steadfast love and confidence. When the summer vacation came, and he crossed the continent to spend two months at home, it was to her that he returned, to the strong, quiet woman about whom his father's life and the life of the house revolved. And now she was gone.

Gone? Dead? Certainly, for the time being, she had vanished, but her son could not accustom his mind to the thought that she would never return. She was as much a part of the place as the old house, or the unchanging San Benito Hills. He glanced through the open door to the court beyond, laid out in beds of flowers she had tended every day. At this time of the morning she would have been there on the sunny western side, bareheaded, sleeves rolled up, and hands protected by heavy gloves—followed by a girl with a basket as she moved among the roses and chrysanthemums. It seemed to Pícaro that if he held his breath, he might hear the faint snip of her shears and her light, deliberate footsteps on the path. . . .

While his heart, moved by an emotion common to all mankind, attempted to deny the fact of death, his cool reason of an engineer warned him that the attempt was in vain. What remained of his mother lay in the earth beside the bones of older De la Torres, in the fenced-in plot of consecrated ground behind the house. He had stood there with his father and Blaise and Rita, in the midst of a silent group of friends, while they had lowered the coffin into the deep new grave. Rita had broken down when Domingo, the old foreman, had let fall the first shovelful of earth, and the major, standing there with a face of iron, had stretched out an arm to the girl and drawn her to him. That was the moment of realization. The service had been unreal, like some harassing dream of a fever patient, aware all the time that the awakening was at hand. The

narrow chapel, into which he had peeped so many times in years gone by, had seemed an unfamiliar place—a vast dim cavern where the air reverberated faintly with the priest's words of hollow consolation, of unconvincing faith in an eternal life beyond the grave. The ceiling, supported on blackened beams, had seemed immensely remote, retreating in the shadows when the candles flickered in a draught; above the altar, containing a relic of a Franciscan saint, the jeweled monstrance spread its rays like an unlighted sun; the statues of the Blessed Virgin, of Saint Joseph, of the Saviour, had almost terrified him with their stern rigidity, seeming to gaze at him with no trace of the kind expression he remembered from the days of his childhood.

On that day, for the first time, Pícaro had come face to face with death. From childhood he had observed the forms of the church, but, as in the case of other Americans of his generation, religion had never been a living issue in his eyes. The belief in God—in the rewards and punishments of a life to come—was a possession shared by all respectable men, like honor, truth, or loyalty. Now, since he had heard the hollow sound of the black clay falling on Doña Margarita's coffin, his mind was struggling to formulate a flood of bewildering thoughts—old as the human race and new as its last-born child. In his new loneliness he clung to his love of Rita; she grew more indispensable with each day that passed, but there were times when even her form melted into the background of everyday life, and he felt himself utterly alone with his barren and disturbing thoughts. His mind, trained to analyze, to classify, to draw conclusions from palpable facts, examined for the first time a subject which had baffled better intellects than his. Little by little his thoughts traveled the path to which every young man of intelligence must come. The Church taught that God had created this world as a dwelling place for man—that God was Love—that all of His actions, however inscrutable they might seem, were for man's ultimate good. Man was two-fold—a mortal body, an immortal soul. In the light of Christian doctrine, each individual life, the world, the entire universe, was progressing—insensibly, perhaps, but infallibly, nevertheless—toward some ultimate goal. But Pícaro was beginning to doubt. He knew that this world was no more than a mote of dust, revolving—quite by chance, perhaps—about one of the less important of a million suns; and science had taught him that all of the other suns, all of the invisible planets in the enormous stretches of space, were made up of the same elements forming the earth on which he lived. Was it conceivable, then, that God had created the earth for man, had set the stars in their places to light the heavens by night? What reason was there for believing in the existence of God at all? If the hairs of man's head were numbered, if God were Love, and if His actions were all for man's ultimate good, why had He taken away the mother whose presence on earth had surely done no harm? Pícaro smiled sadly at the childishness of the

thought. As for the life of the spirit, what basis was there for the belief that man possessed a soul? No man had ever seen one, touched one, spoken with one, weighed one, measured one. Man was the highest of the animals, but an animal, nevertheless. Why should he possess a soul any more than a monkey, a dog, or a jellyfish? No . . . the earth was only an accumulation of interstellar dust, and its life no more than the blind stirring of the elements. Nature was cruel, indifferent, without purpose and without order; Christianity was only a development of the savage animism which once peopled the land, the sea, and the sky with beings of human form. Nothing remained but beauty and scientific truth—both impersonal and even terrible—unless one's eyes were closed.

He thought of his mother. She had possessed beauty—personal and warm, a beauty which could only be defined as spiritual. Was it possible that such a being could be blotted out? In spite of his chilling doubts he felt a conviction, at once profound and unsupported by his intellect, that somewhere, in some new and radiant form, Doña Margarita lived. . . .

There was a knock at the open door and Pícaro rose as he heard his father's voice. The major maintained with his sons the same slightly formal courtesy he observed toward friends of his own age.

"May I come in?" he asked, in his pleasant voice, which still retained the soft accent of his native state. "I'm sorry to interrupt your work, but I want to have a talk with you in private."

"Come in, sir—please. It's not often you pay me a visit."

Old Langhorne closed the door behind him and seated himself in the chair his son moved to face away from the light. He offered his case to Pícaro, chose a cigar, cut the end, and lit it deliberately before he spoke.

"You're wise, my boy," he remarked, with a glance at the desk, littered with drafting instruments. "Work is good for us just now. I've been out with young Julius since six o'clock, measuring the land on the mesa where we're going to try limas next year. There'll be a lot of fencing to do. . . . Let's be grateful that we can work. I don't know what I should do these days without the ranch!"

Pícaro was startled and touched at his father's words; for the major this was an extraordinary admission, an unprecedented confession of weakness. He looked at the old man with sympathy in the gaze of his steady eyes. Here perhaps was a man who missed Doña Margarita more keenly than her son.

"Your mother's death has hit me hard," old Langhorne went on. "Sometimes I'm grateful that I haven't much longer to live. I've been doing a good deal of thinking lately. The time has come to talk over what you are going to do when I'm gone. I have my own ideas on the subject and I hope I'll be able to make you see my point of view. You'll have to be patient with me;

I'm not much of a talker, sometimes it's hard for me to put my thoughts into words."

Pícaro had been standing by the wall, but now, without taking his eyes from his father's face, he seated himself in a Morris chair, struck a match, and held it to the cold bowl of his pipe.

"First of all," the major began, "try to put yourself in my place so as to understand my feeling about family. It's not a popular idea nowadays, but life has taught me that blood counts in men as surely as it does in stock. And there's good blood in you boys—on both sides. My people were men of some note in South Carolina before the war, and as for your mother, the first of her ancestors to cross the sea was old Enrique de la Torre del Pino, a grandee of Spain, who called the king 'my cousin' and kept his hat on in the presence of royalty. But you'll find all this in my journal if you're ever interested enough to look it up.

"Whether or not you believe in the teachings of the Church, there's one kind of immortality that most men can count on—the spark of life we receive from our fathers and pass on to our sons after us. If the inheritance is good, it's a joy to hand it on and to do everything in one's power to insure its survival. Some day you'll find this out for yourself. The finest thing about our Republic is its equality of opportunity; its worst feature is the standard of money as the measure of a man. That's wrong, my boy, and don't ever lose sight of what I say. I reckon money-making is a talent like any other talent, and if a man hasn't got it, that's nothing against his character. My father was a moneymaker and I was an only son; all I've ever done is to keep what your mother and I had. Two or three generations may pass before any more money crops up in the family, and meanwhile I'd hate to see things go to pieces. You see what I'm driving at—an idea hundreds of years old.

"There are three of you—you two boys and Rita. I hope that you or Blaise will marry her some day; it's what your mother would have liked. But that's for you to decide. We're not rich. If I divide what we have into three parts, the ranch would be split up in the end, and none of you would have enough to keep the family going. The other alternative seems hard, but I reckon it's the only way. Rita will have a small income, in case of need; one of you will take the ranch and all we have, and the other will set out to fend for himself. You're the elder, and it's right that I should come to you first. Think it over, and don't cloud your mind with unselfish thoughts. Remember—the family comes first!"

The major rose from his chair, as if to indicate that the conversation was at an end and that he did not wish for an immediate reply.

"You understand me, I think," he said, as Pícaro rose and stood facing him; "I hope that you agree with me. But in this case, even though our opinions differed, I should feel justified in exercising my rights as head of the family."

The father's grave and kindly smile disarmed his words.

"Yes, sir," replied the younger man, "I understand quite well what you mean, and I agree that the Guadalupe should go to a single owner. As for my own decision, I'll let you know in a day or two, if I may have a little time to think it over."

"By all means," the major said, cordially, as he turned to open the door. "Take as much time as you want. I'll leave you now. You must pardon me for interrupting your work."

It was the first time that Pícaro had been admitted to discussion of family affairs, and, though he had given no sign, his mind was at work on a hundred new possibilities opening before him as the result of his father's words. Somehow, without definite grounds for the belief, he had taken it for granted that he—the engineer, the professional man trained at his father's expense—was to be the one to go out into the world, and that Blaise would succeed his father on the ranch. His silence with Rita, his hesitation to reveal his love for her, had been based, in part at least, on the uncertainties of the future. Now, if he wished, he was free to ask her to be his wife—doubly free, since the father's blessing was sure. Though he felt for Blaise the affection engendered by a stock of common memories, he had no illusions as to his brother's character and knew in his heart that Blaise was not the man to carry out the father's dream. He knew also that if he decided to assume the *rôle* of head of the family, there would be no cause for worry over Blaise's future; the boy had a sure instinct where worldly matters were concerned. He was almost self-supporting now, thanks to his shrewdness and to the help of his rich friends. The car had been bought with his own money; Pícaro still remembered the father's pride when a turn in oil stocks had made Blaise the possessor of several thousand dollars at once. There was no need of worry about Blaise.

The very fact that the easy and pleasant way seemed the right path made Pícaro hesitate, to examine from every angle the results of such a decision. He loved the ranch, and long experience had given him an understanding of the soil and of his father's dependents. His own mechanical work could be carried on here as well as anywhere else; his little laboratory was well equipped, and the city, with its shops and foundries, was not far off. And there would be ample time to fit his hours of work into the easy-going routine of the ranch.

It was an alluring vision that filled his mind as he sat smoking after the elder man had gone. For the time being his comfortless speculations were replaced by personal thoughts. He realized now that the thought of parting from the Guadalupe had been with him for years, a shadow on the future. He had accepted—not without twinges of conscience—his father's offer of a year of leisure to develop his own ideas, but he had known that this was only

putting off the day of parting, that sooner or later he must bid the ranch farewell and go out into the world to put his training to use. Pícaro was not a practical man; his attitude toward his work contained little thought of fame and less of material reward. He was a creator, and like an artist inspired to express in form and color a new vision of beauty, he worked because there was in him something which must come out. In the realm of mechanics he felt the thrill of a significance akin to beauty itself—austere, orderly, aloof from the concerns of men.

He had only to signify his wish; a word would make him free to spend the rest of his days on the ranch, to devote himself to his work unhampered by economic necessity. And Rita . . . he saw himself growing old on the Guadalupe with her at his side . . . a boy, perhaps, who would be brought up as the major would have wished, to love the land on which his father and grandfather had lived. For a time, until the sound of the bell told him that it was time for lunch, Pícaro sat by the window in the warm spring air, permitting his thoughts to wander into one of those iridescent futures known to all young men.

An hour later he was sitting with Rita on the gallery. Blaise lay in a hammock near by, with a novel which descended gradually until it rested face downward on his chest, as he closed his eyes to take his customary nap. The Guadalupe kept hours of its own, unchanged since the days of colonial Spanish rule. Early in the morning, long before daylight in the winter months, lights began to appear in the thatched houses of the *vaqueros* along the river; women were stirring, fires were lit, and the air carried the scent of wood smoke and a sound of rhythmic slapping as the day's *tortillas* were patted into shape. At six the men rode out to work, and at eleven those who had not ridden to distant parts of the ranch returned to lunch and a siesta till one. Major Langhorne observed the old custom of the country—he had gone to his room to sleep until Domingo's vigorous strokes on the bell by the corrals announced that it was one o'clock.

The rains had been bountiful that year and the hills sloping toward the sea were still green with mustard and wild oats, still carpeted with the rich verdure of *alfilería*. A few gauzy clouds floated at a great height against the soft blue of the sky, and the sea was of the deep ruffled blue which comes with a northwest breeze. Pícaro stood up, taking a deep breath as he gazed out on the view of land and sea. He turned to the girl.

"The wind will hold all afternoon," he said. "What do you say to a sail?"

She smiled up at him, laying aside the hoop of embroidery on which she had been at work. "I was thinking of the same thing," she answered; "but I was afraid you couldn't get away from your work. Let's start now. I'll be ready in a moment."

A quarter of an hour's walk brought them to the paved state road, which followed the coast line—rising, falling, and turning in long gentle curves. Then Pícaro led the way over a trail of their own, along the inner beach of Toros Point, past the creeks and the pale-green sedge and pickleweed of the marsh, to where his boat lay at her moorings in the cove beyond the dunes. He dragged the dinghy from its shelter under a thick green sumac bush, launched it in the gentle wash of the sea, and sprang in beside Rita, who held their shoes and stockings in her hands. When the dinghy was moored and the sails of the cutter shivering in the breeze, Pícaro cast off. "Take the tiller, if you don't mind," he remarked; "I feel lazy to-day." He backed the jib till it caught the wind and swung the bow about, and lay back to watch the girl at the helm, perched by the weather rail as the lively little vessel lay over and began to cut the water with a crisp rippling sound.

Rita's cheeks were flushed and her hair in an attractive disarray; her brown eyes sparkled as she gazed eagerly ahead, judging whether they would fetch the entrance. The man's eyes rested affectionately on the slender hand at the tiller—delicately browned by the sun; on the slim bare foot flexed gracefully as she leaned against the pull of the helm. He knew her far better than he knew his brother, yet at that moment Rita seemed more remote, more unattainable than ever before.

He glanced ahead and saw that they were close to the rocky southern shore. He heard her shout, "Hard alee!" and next moment the cutter was on the port tack and heading out into the open sea. The swing of the ground swell caught them, and Pícaro stood up to face the fresh salt wind. Suddenly he felt confident, sure of himself. He went aft to slack away the sheet as they turned and headed southward along an endless panorama of coast—gray-green hills above low bluffs with a line of white at their base.

"Rita," he said, seating himself opposite the helmsman, "I've been talking with father this morning, and now I want to have a talk with you. You don't mind if I have something serious to say?"

She had smiled at him as he came aft, but now the smile vanished and a grave expression replaced the sparkle in her eyes. Instinct warned her of the declaration that was coming, but she perceived that the words Pícaro was about to speak were inevitable—that the hour she dreaded had come at last.

"What is it, Píc?" she asked, quietly.

Pícaro had never appeared to better advantage than at that moment. His fair hair was ruffled by the wind; the collar of a soft shirt set off his ruddy tan; the lines of his face—a little harsh at other times—were softened by anxiety and love. Rita was thinking that of the young men she had known, this one was easily the finest, from every point of view; and wondering, in spite of the calm affection she had always felt for him, why it was that his presence did not

quicken her breath or cause her a flutter of the pulse.

Now that the time had come, Pícaro found it difficult to speak. His hand, resting on the coaming beside him, trembled a little, and his heart was beating so that he could scarcely breathe. He felt that the words he would presently blurt out would be abrupt, uncouth, ill chosen, enough to ruin his case in themselves. He longed for a gift of fluent and persuasive speech, to express the emotion, the yearning, that was stifling him. All his future, it seemed, depended on a flow of words which would not come.

"I can't wait any longer," he broke out abruptly, after a moment's pause; "I must tell you now. I might have been able to wait if mother were not gone. Rita—you are dearer to me than anyone else in the world; I've loved you since you were a child, the little girl I used to take riding and sailing with me—and I'll go on loving you until I die. If you could marry me, it would make me very happy. We could live here on the old Guadalupe—I know you love the ranch." His voice was trembling as he ceased to speak and gazed anxiously into her eyes, which were slowly filling with tears. She turned away, shaking her head.

"Dear old Píc," she said in a low voice, reaching across the cockpit to lay her hand on his knee. "If only I could. I love you so dearly, but in another way! I'm sorry—dreadfully sorry—but you must give up the thought of our marrying."

His face paled as she spoke. "Why?" he asked, with the simplicity of a child.

"Because there's only one man I could marry," she answered, gravely. "Perhaps I'd better tell you . . . it's Blaise."

Pícaro attempted to speak and, failing, turned away his head. Blaise . . . so she loved his brother, who scarcely gave her a thought from one week to the next. She was only eighteen, yet in character she was a woman, and not a woman of the changing kind. If she loved Blaise, the poor child would have her own tragedy to live out, whether or not she ever married him. What a cruel tangle—a snarl of needless pain! . . .

"You are quite sure of yourself, Rita?" he asked, quietly, at the end of a long silence.

"Yes."

He managed to smile as he rose to his feet, swaying with the motion of the cutter, and bent over to kiss her forehead gravely. She motioned him to take the tiller, and went forward blindly to the hatch.

Rita did not come in to dinner that evening, and Pícaro said scarcely a word throughout the old-fashioned, slightly formal meal. The major may have had his own thoughts concerning his son's mood and the girl's unusual absence, but if so, he gave no sign. He seemed to be regaining a little of his old manner—speaking with Blaise about the affairs of the ranch and smiling

kindly at the old negro, who muttered an apology for the trembling hand which filled his master's glass with wine.

"We're not so young as we were, eh, Julius?"

Blaise, who danced till four and rose at ten in the city, kept the hours of a farm hand at home, and at nine o'clock, when the three men were smoking in the major's study, he excused himself and went off yawning to bed. Pícaro laid down the technical journal he had been trying to read.

"I have something to tell you, sir," he said, "if you're not tired this evening."

The older man looked up from his book. "Yes? What is it, old fellow?" he asked, kindly. His ear had caught the faint note of dejection in Pícaro's voice.

"You remember our talk this morning, father? Well, I've made up my mind. Blaise is the man to carry on with the ranch—not I. I love the place, as you know, but I'm an engineer by training and by taste, and a man can't serve two masters well. I've thought it over from all angles, and I believe I'm doing the right thing."

Major Langhorne, looking gravely at his elder son, felt a slight throb of exultation, succeeded by shame at an unworthy thought. What a fine chap Pícaro was, to be sure; more of a man than Blaise, no doubt. This unselfish decision meant that the younger boy, who held the first place in his heart, would be always near him, would follow him as *patrón* of the Guadalupe!

"Are you sure," he asked, "that you have taken time enough to think it over? You are the elder, and if you want it, the place is yours by right. You seem a little upset to-night. Isn't it possible that another day or two might change your mind? Don't decide too hastily; haste sometimes leads to regret."

Pícaro shook his head with a smile. "No, father. I've decided once and for all, so you can make your plans accordingly. Blaise is the man for the ranch; I'll keep on with the work that interests me most. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I have a lot of confidence—a feeling that I may be able to do something worth while."

The major nodded as he cut a fresh cigar. "It is for you to say," he said, "and you know best. We'll call that settled, then. Would you mind giving me an idea of your plans? I shall insist on giving you what help I can at the start."

"Not at all, sir," answered Pícaro, with an alacrity that showed his relief at the change of subject. "As you know, I have a lot of faith in the future of flying, and I've been trying for a year to design a motor lighter and better than anything now known. I think I'm on the right track. In France, the engineers have gone far along these lines. I want to go there, have a look at what their designers are doing, find work which will support me, and settle down to build my motor in what time I can spare."

The old man nodded again. It grieved him to think that Pícaro's work

would take him so far away. He rose from his chair, took up the lamp, and walked to his desk. When he returned, a moment later, he handed his son a slip of paper before he set down the lamp. It was a freshly blotted cheque.

"That will tide you over," the father remarked, "till you're settled and under way. I wish it were more, but it's all I can spare just now. I'm giving it to you now so that you can make your plans with a quiet mind. I hope you'll stay on at least a few months more. I reckon I'll miss you a lot, my boy . . . we all shall."

Pícaro smiled. "I hate to leave the old place, father. Don't tempt me to stop on longer than I should. And thank you for the money. You're too generous—I could do with half as much."

The major rose again and held out his hand. "Good night, Henry," he said, gravely. The use of the almost forgotten name proved that the old man was deeply moved.

CHAPTER THREE

It was the time of the annual branding of calves, and Blaise had been out every day with the men, rising long before daylight and coming home so tired that once he dropped off to sleep before the dinner bell. Day after day the cattle came streaming in—wild-eyed and half-defiant cows, with awkward calves frisking alongside; a few steers; and here and there a ponderous white-faced bull. They came from the flat coastal mesas, from brushy draws leading into the upper valley, from thickets of chaparral and manzanita among the cañons of the San Benito Hills. All day long, in the corrals along the river bottom, the riders worked under a haze of dust shot with the acrid fumes of burning hair. By night the valley was filled with a perpetual melancholy uproar—cows calling to their calves, and calves bawling for mothers from whom they were separated for the first time.

This was the work Blaise loved—a taste inherited from ancestors who had seen tall Boston ships at anchor in the bay, and heard the creaking wheels of bullock-carts moving toward the beach, laden with stacks of sun-dried hides. The major loved it, too—the bawling of the cattle, which would have strained the nerves of any city man, lulled him to sleep at night; and during the day he was to be seen in his spring wagon, tally book in hand, while old Julius dozed beside him on the seat, arousing himself now and then to disperse the flies on the backs of a pair of elderly trotting-horses.

At last, when only a handful of calves remained unbranded, Blaise offered to take his brother to the city for the day. There were sailings to inquire about and books to buy, for Pícaro felt that it was time he brushed up his stock of schoolboy French.

They had lunched together at a club and now their errands were done and they were homeward bound—past the confusion and din of the downtown traffic, through which Blaise threaded his way with the effrontery of a gamin taxi driver; past miles of diminutive bungalows, each with its two rectangles of lawn divided by a walk of cement; and past the great coastal plain—a chessboard of orchard, pasture, and market garden, broken by ranges of low hills on which oil derricks bristled hideously.

It was late afternoon when they smelled the salt perfume of the sea and turned to follow the road between the foothills and the dunes—a broad white road which stretched off to the south so straight that it seemed to end in the imaginary point where all the lines of perspective meet. Pícaro filled his lungs with the clean air, scented with salty drying kelp and the blossoms of the hardy plants that grow among the dunes. He had felt more than usually stifled in the

city that day, confused by the disorderly rush and clamor of the streets and depressed by the white faces of the crowds.

After all, he thought, which was the more real—the swarming life of the city, or the little world of the ranch, with its peace, its dignity, its seclusion in the midst of a busy age? Mankind had long since passed the stage when everyone could live on the land. No . . . with all its peaceful beauty, all its atmosphere of primitive kinship with the soil, the ranch was unreal—a relic of another age, preserved by walls of artifice against the encroachments of the world. Pícaro smiled to himself, a little sadly. For the first time, he saw his father in a new light: a quaint, old-time figure out of a forgotten past; an object of archæological interest—of local pride, perhaps—to point out to sentimental tourists in this California of motor cars, market gardens, bungalows in the mission style, oil wells and real estate. . . .

Blaise was never a talker with men; he had scarcely exchanged a word with his brother since lunch. He seemed preoccupied and drove slowly, gazing moodily ahead. Suddenly Pícaro heard the trampling of a powerful exhaust, the harsh scream of an electric horn. Next moment he snatched at his hat as a heavy car swept past at sixty miles an hour. There were faint shrieks, a vision of veiled faces, the backward flutter of a handkerchief. Blaise gripped the wheel with a sparkle in his eye, all his languid moodiness gone.

"The Whitneys," he said in explanation; "they told me they were going to Coronado. Sit tight and we'll have some fun with them."

He opened the cut-out, leaned forward to pump additional oil with his free hand, and pressed the sensitive throttle underfoot. Pícaro's ears were stunned by the motor's deep and rapid explosions; he felt the seat pressing against his back, saw the telegraph-poles leap toward him and flick past, felt the wind roaring in his ears as the car gathered speed and flew southward. He glanced down at the instruments under the cowl . . . sixty-five—seventy—seventy-five. Jove! Blaise's little car could go! They rushed at a long gentle hill, struck a culvert near the top, seemed to bound into the air and touch again with a faint buoyant impact, and flew down the straight five-mile stretch beyond. Now the big car was close ahead. Eighty! Blaise was going to pass them at eighty miles an hour. The little car shrieked twice, a shattering, discordant cry, and the machine ahead increased its speed as it moved slowly to the right. Next moment they were flashing past—Blaise raising one hand for an instant to wave mockingly at his friends.

It was late and the road was almost deserted. Blaise held the throttle open as they sped south, up hills, across mesas, along the base of bluffs that magnified the roar of the exhaust. Now they were on their own land, flying between two lines of fence posts that winked past with the rapidity of a cinematograph. Little by little the speed diminished as they approached the

turn-off to the ranch; then at forty miles an hour Blaise flung the car about and headed up the valley to the house. Next moment the brakes were screaming as they came to a stop.

"Gad! Blaise," remarked the elder brother as he climbed out stiffly, "you can drive!"

The other's face was illuminated by one of the smiles he usually reserved for women. "She can move, eh?" he observed in his soft voice. "There's something about speed . . ."

Pícaro lingered for a moment while his brother struggled out of his dust coat and walked away. It was the hour when day faded into dusk, and in this gray, crepuscular light the old house seemed as much a part of nature as the hills. Along the gallery the arches and their supporting columns were outlined against a glimmer of warm lamplight; a murmur of subdued voices came from the servants' bench; somewhere far away the howl of a coyote rose, quavered, and died. Under the cottonwoods he saw the glare of a bonfire with black moving figures against its light; there was a scent of wood smoke, the distant measured thudding of an ax, the faint twang of a guitar. . . . His thoughts were wandering again. Perhaps he had been wrong—perhaps the abiding realities were here, attuned to the soil, to the mountains, to the sea. Might not a day come when Nature would shake herself, to obliterate with a sudden impatient gesture the monstrous growths of the city—the rows of mushroom dwellings, the hurried swarms of unhappy men and women out of step with the procession of the years?

The major was walking on the gallery, a dim figure in riding clothes, signaled by the glowing end of a cigar.

"I'm glad you're back," he remarked as he stopped to greet his son. "We'll have dinner early to-night. We finished the branding at noon, and Domingo came in to ask if I didn't want to put off the fiesta. He was thinking of your mother, but I told him she would have wanted the men to have their good time. I've given them a barrel of wine and a steer to roast. We must go down for a while after dinner."

An hour later the major offered Rita his arm and led the way to the grove of cottonwoods, where chairs were set out for them in the firelight. It had been the custom of the ranch, since times beyond the memory of the oldest man present, to celebrate the finish of the annual branding—the hardest work of the year. The Guadalupe was in reality an island, on which the half-Spanish life of an elder California had survived—one of a few fast-disappearing colonies still scattered in lonely portions of the state. Most of the major's people were of the old blood, born on the land, but among the riders there was one Mexican from the Peninsula, and Pícaro saw a group of Americans sitting on the grass—the

tractor crew and a pair of drillers from the new oil field—gaunt, sunburnt men, taller than the *vaqueros* and holding themselves a little aloof. The pit where the steer was roasting had not been opened, but Domingo had broached the hogshead of wine, cups were passing around, and the old-country Mexican—a tigerish man with narrow eyes and a thin drooping mustache—was striking up a favorite song. He sat leaning against the trunk of a cottonwood, with the firelight illuminating his swarthy, handsome face; there was a cup of wine on the grass beside him, and he held a guitar which he fingered skillfully without once glancing at the frets. He struck a series of chords in a minor key and suddenly Pícaro heard his voice, resonant and high-pitched:

"La Lola tiene un chiquillo
Y el pobrecillo
Se murió."

He slapped his hand on the strings, threw back his head, and struck a single deep note. The crowd was swaying in time to the song, and at this signal the others took up the chorus with a will:

"Pasa Reverte
Le dice: 'No llores Lola
Que aquí estoy yo!'"

There was no other singer like Juan Montez on the ranch. The major leaned toward his sons. "There's a magnetism about that fellow," he remarked in a low voice. "They're a little afraid of him, too; he came north because he had killed a man in Rosario. Domingo tells me he's the smartest cow-hand on the place." He made a sign, and the foreman stood up, raising an arm for silence.

"The *patrón* wishes me to tell you," he announced, "that this has been a good year for the ranch. He thanks every man for his work and desires you to know that you will share in its prosperity."

A subdued noise of clapping greeted the words. Doña Margarita was only a short time in her grave, and there was delicacy in these people of Latin blood—they were pleased, and they knew how to show it without vociferation. Rita and the major rose during the momentary pause which followed, gave the company a pleasant good night, and walked away toward the house.

Ordinarily Pícaro would have followed his father, but now he watched the *vaqueros* and their women with a new sense of detachment, a fresh appreciation of a scene at once exotic and familiar from childhood days. As for Blaise, he was in his element. On these occasions he drank his share of harsh red wine; danced with the girls, or sang them a song when the guitar was passed his way. But to-night he seemed tired—lying in the grass with the palm of one hand supporting his head, eyes half closed and a cigarette hanging from

his lips. His brother sat watching intently, with a grave half smile. He was intensely aware of the strangeness of the scene before him—the firelight reflected on the brown faces of primitive men; the wild figures of the riders, in their broad hats and breeches of leather, ornamented with hammered silver disks; the swaying bodies of the women, moving their arms in set gestures to the click of castanets.

All at once Pícaro heard shouts and saw that a ring had been cleared—that Lupita, the foreman's graceful daughter, was moving out to dance. The girl was shy, and fat old Concha, her mother, was urging her with little encouraging pats. She was not more than sixteen, and she possessed the slender beauty to be found among the young girls of southern lands—women who are middle-aged at twenty-five. Her hair was piled high on her head and held by a silver comb, heavy earrings hung from her ears, and a tasseled scarf was tied about her hips in the revealing manner of her race. Blaise was sitting up, watching the dancer with a sudden interest in his eyes.

Montez plucked his guitar, fingers began to snap, and a violin took up the air—a swaying, throbbing offspring of the *Seguidilla*. The first note dissipated the girl's timidity. Stepping lightly—her hips, her arms, her shoulders alive with the intoxication of the music—she moved slowly about the circle, challenging the young men to dance. Pícaro heard a chuckle of amusement and turned to see Blaise spring to his feet. The spectators, seated on the grass, moved aside to make way for him, and next moment he snapped his fingers and was dancing opposite the girl. The music throbbed and deepened in barbaric cadences. Now Blaise was pursuing the graceful Lupita, who retreated before him coquettishly—shy, flirtatious, half afraid. The dance was a pantomime of love, and he teased her, pleaded with her, entreated her with gestures that brought a murmur of approval from the watchers. Then, with a suddenness that was startling, the music ceased and the dancers stood motionless, as if the silence had frozen them in the poses of an instant before. Next moment the musicians took up the air where it had stopped, and the young pair sprang into life. This time it was Lupita who followed the slowly retreating Blaise—pleading, wooing, teasing with every sway of her body, every movement of her graceful arms. . . .

Moved by a vague distaste, Pícaro rose and walked away among the shadows. In spite of himself, he had felt the spell of the dancing, but it displeased him to see Blaise amusing himself so soon after their mother's death, and the spectacle of his brother and the foreman's daughter had irritated him in a manner he could scarcely define. The girl was pretty enough in a vulgar way, but what business had Blaise dancing with this descendant of Indian women and low Spanish adventurers, when Rita du Quesne was waiting for him at the house?

He found Rita in a hammock on the gallery. The major was reading inside. The night was warm and a crescent moon was setting over Toros Point.

"They seem to be enjoying themselves," she remarked, as a confused sound of shouting drifted up from the bottom land. Pícaro had brought a steamer chair and was stretching himself beside her.

"Trust the wine for that," he answered.

"You seem a little dismal to-night. Did you have a tiresome day?"

"The crowds in the city depress me, Rita. They seem symbolical of these restless times. I don't like people—there's no use pretending that I do." The girl turned her head in the darkness; he fancied that he could perceive her gentle smile.

"I'm going to preach you a sermon, Píc," she said, after a moment's pause. "You won't mind? Well, you've always disliked people because you've never known them—never taken a part in everyday life. You live in a little world of your own, where the real things are birds, and beasts, and sunsets, and higher mathematics. No—don't laugh! I mean what I say! I've seen you wrought up at the notion that some variety of bird was threatened with extermination, but if you opened a newspaper now, and read that a thousand Armenians had been massacred by the Turks, you would turn away with a yawn. And yet the people on the streets—the unattractive people you find so depressing, feel these things in a way you can't understand—feel them enough to subscribe their pennies for relief."

"By Jove!" he interrupted her, with a chuckle, "keep on another minute and I'll subscribe, myself!"

"Let me finish. I love birds, too—you taught me that, and taught me to love the ocean and the hills—but I love human beings, and I wish you did! There—my sermon's done."

"Rita," he asked, after a moment of silence, "do you believe in God?"

"Of course I do! What a question! Don't you?"

"You have brains," he went on, evading the reply. "Do you believe that your consciousness will continue after your body is dead? That our actions in this world will be punished or rewarded in a future life? That the world was made for us, and that each individual is a cog in an ordered progression?"

"Yes, I believe in all those things. I don't think of them much, or try to convince myself one way or the other—I simply know."

"I wish I knew," he said, with a sigh. He filled his pipe, and the flare of a match illuminated his thoughtful face.

"I need religion," he went on; "everyone does. But now, when it seems to me that I need it more than ever before, I've lost my grasp on the things mother taught me to believe. Forgive me for inflicting my thoughts on you. . . . I'm leaving on Monday, by the way."

“Oh, Píc! I’m sorry it must be so soon!”

It was Monday morning and there was an unaccustomed stir about the house, for this was the day of Pícaro’s departure. His trunk had gone on ahead and he was in his room with Rita, who was helping him to pack his bag. Blaise’s low, dusty car stood outside the gallery, and its owner lay smoking in the hammock, turning the sheets of yesterday’s San Francisco paper. The major paced up and down before the door of his study, head bowed and hands clasped behind his back.

At the other end of the gallery a group of the Guadalupe people was clustered about the bench where old Julius sat, with his gold-headed stick between his knees. His son, known as young Julius, sat beside him—a powerful, coal-black man who treated his father with exaggerated respect. There was also a third generation of the tribe of Julius, and its single representative was playing in the dust beyond the arches—a small black boy, called Little Julius, whose toothless and disarming grin was belied by a malicious eye.

A gaunt old man stood by the bench, smoking a cigar the major had given him. His trousers, supported by a silver-studded belt, were pulled down over the legs of high-heeled boots, and he wore a black shirt under an unbuttoned vest. Long white mustaches drooped about his mouth; his skin was the color of old leather and seamed by a thousand wrinkles about the eyes and on the back of his neck. He stood with one leg bent, toe to the flagstones, and his weight resting on the other; when he walked, it was with an effort and an atrocious limp, for the muscles of his thigh had not healed properly after he had been thrown and gored by a heifer, many years before. But he asked no odds, and one forgot his injury the moment he was in the saddle. This was Domingo, the husband of Concha and the father of the girl Lupita. Like the others, he was waiting to bid the major’s son farewell.

Pícaro’s bag was packed and Rita watched him while he lingered to glance about the room which held so many memories. He had the feeling, common to all men when they quit a place they love, that this might be the last time his eyes would rest on these four walls, on the bed in which he had slept as a child, on the shelves with their rows of worn books, on the view of the sunny hills he knew so well. He raised his eyes to the stuffed birds along the picture rail. How well he remembered the day he had stalked that tree-duck on the marsh! It had risen out of range the first time, and flown to the creek at the south end. He could still feel the excitement of fourteen years ago—the realization that this was a bird that he had never seen—the fear of its escape—the thrill when it had folded its wings and plunged downward at his shot! It had proved a new northern record; his boyish paper published in the *Auk* had made a small stir among the ornithologists.

The breeze blowing through the open windows was perfumed with the warm scent of sage, and a valley quail was calling somewhere in the hills behind the house. The three clear notes, mellowed by distance, seemed to express the spirit of the place. . . .

Pícaro took up his bag and followed Rita through the door. He walked to the bench on the gallery, where Julius was rising tremblingly to his feet.

"Good-by, sir, Mr. Henry," muttered the old negro, his eyes blinking as he took Pícaro's outstretched hand. "Don't you forget us, in them foreign lands!"

Now he was shaking hands with Young Julius, and the grandson—a faithful companion on many days of fishing and shooting—trotted up and clung to his father's leg. Finally it was Domingo's turn, and his murmured "*Adios, patróncito*" expressed less than his eyes or the warm clasp of his hand. Pícaro felt oddly choked as he turned away from these friendly faces. His father had stopped and was watching him while he walked to where Rita was standing by the door, but the major's eyes told him nothing, for Pícaro approached the girl without hesitation, took her in his arms, and kissed her in the offhand and affectionate fashion of a brother.

"Well, sir," he said as he clasped his father's hand, "we must be off! Good-by, and thank you again for making this trip possible!"

The major was standing very straight, holding in his left hand a cigar which sent up a ribbon of thin blue smoke. "Good-by, son," he said.

Pícaro heard the rumble of the exhaust and saw that Blaise was already at the wheel. As he settled himself in the seat he was aware of sounds behind him, and turned to see fat old Concha, who had gone off to fetch her daughter, trotting up to bid him farewell. She had been his nurse before Blaise was born, and now she flung her arms about him with a breathless wail.

"*Ay Dios!* Wouldst thou have gone off without a kiss for old Conchita? God bless thee, *nene*, and bring thee safely back!"

The girl came forward timidly and held out her hand. Pícaro noticed that in the daylight she was extraordinarily handsome. "Good-by, Mr. Langhorne," she said, in the English she had learned at school.

CHAPTER FOUR

High up in a hotel on Forty-second Street, in a room resembling in shape and size the interior of a packing case, severely furnished in mahogany, Pícaro lay resting after his five-day journey from the West. A tray bearing the remnants of breakfast stood on a table by the bed. He had bathed in the tiled bathroom, so small that one seemed to step from the door into the tub; the window was open to admit the warm air, and he lay in a dressing gown, smoking his pipe and looking forward to a lazy morning indoors. The telephone by the door emitted a peremptory buzz.

"Mr. Langhorne? Mr. Foster to see you."

"Foster, did you say?"

"Yes, sir—Mr. Bradley Foster."

"Oh! Please ask him to come up."

Pícaro smiled as he hung up the receiver. Old Brad. . . . So he was in New York! What could he be doing here? He had been in Detroit when last heard from. Some one had written to say that he was married and had a good place with a manufacturer of motor-cars.

There were steps in the hall and a sudden knock at the door.

"Come in!"

The door was flung open and Foster burst in impetuously to greet his friend. He was a tall young man, with a sallow face, brilliant black eyes, and a sensitive mouth. He was expensively dressed, but his shoes were a shade too large, his collar did not fit, his coat seemed to have been borrowed from a larger man, and his handsome knitted cravat was clumsily tied.

"Píc!" he exclaimed. "Lord, man, I'm glad to see you! What are you doing in New York?"

"Just what I was going to ask you. I'm on my way to France."

"I'm living here now. I came in to meet our Chicago man, and saw your name on the register. Listen, I've got to run—fellow waiting for me downstairs! Will you have lunch with me? I'll arrange to take the afternoon off. All right for you? Make it twelve o'clock. I'll pick you up here and we'll go to the Engineers' Club." He dashed away impetuously as he had come, leaving the room filled with his bustling and cheerful vitality.

Foster was the son of a country doctor who had made extraordinary sacrifices to equip his boy for wider horizons than those of the Middle Western countryside the father detested, and from which he had never had courage to escape. When Bradley's education was finished and he had found work that made him self-supporting, Doctor Foster put what remained of his affairs in

order, sold his practice, and lay down to die. The doctor had been cursed with an excellent mind, without either the courage or the initiative to put his brains to use, and his son inherited this intelligence, which was the only legacy the father had to leave. But the boy was of tougher fiber—he had energy, determination, and the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices for success. Pícaro met him in the laboratory, during their first year at the institute, and he had smiled at the intensely earnest Western student—aggressive, radiating vitality, full of enthusiasm, and a little uncouth. The other's aggressiveness had repelled him in the beginning, for Foster possessed little humor and no tact, but as time went on he perceived that this was a man of ability and at heart a friendly lad, eager to learn. He had an incredible capacity for work. Pícaro had often dropped in, late at night, at the shabby room in a third-rate boarding house, where Foster was to be found in slippers and a worn dressing gown, a green shade over his eyes as he worked feverishly at a table littered with papers and books. Other students found enough to do with their courses at the institute, but not Bradley. By methods of saving at which Pícaro could only guess, he paid for an encyclopædia on the installment plan, and read volume after volume—with a sort of grim and undiscriminating determination—as a cultural exercise. He subscribed to several of the correspondence courses so characteristic of the age—will power, memory training, efficiency, business law. Pícaro had noticed an advertisement of the course in will power, headed by a picture of a man in evening clothes, standing with one hand on his hip as he gazed contemptuously at a lion which fawned before him. Beneath the picture the virtues of the course were enumerated, and the first benefit the student might expect was the cultivation of a "stern, compelling gaze." Pícaro had been unable to suppress a grin, which became a laugh when he entered Foster's room a few days later and took his friend unawares—standing before the mirror and making odd grimaces with his mouth and eyes. The other had blushed, grinned guiltily, and finally joined in the laughter as he tossed away the damning sheet. "This thing's all right," he had insisted, when they were calm once more, "but I'm through with it; it makes me feel like a fool!" On another occasion, when they had been reading for some time, Pícaro stood up suddenly and saw his friend start with a hasty, furtive gesture as he tucked out of sight a widely advertised manual of etiquette.

They were lunching at the club into which Foster had ushered his friend with a suspicion of impressiveness—a faint, new air of consequence. While they drank their cocktails in the lounge, Foster had summoned a waiter and written out his order for a rather elaborate meal. "Plenty of peppers in the salad," he told the man, with the manner of one whose palate needs tickling of

the most delicate; “see that the steak is not cooked to death, and try to get us some small clams—the big ones are tough.” Several men came in while they were waiting, and Pícaro was introduced to all of them—somewhat unnecessarily, he thought. “Mr. Langhorne—a classmate of mine at the institute. Stopping over a day or two on his way to France.” And to one elderly member, who looked very bored behind gold-rimmed glasses and an enormous mustache which gave him the morose air of a walrus: “Langhorne’s in your line, Mr. Livingstone . . . mechanical. You must have read his paper, ‘The Limits of Piston Speed in Internal-combustion Motors’?” The old man muttered something intended to be courteous, seized Pícaro’s hand for an instant, and turned away to dive through a pair of swinging doors.

While they ate their lunch in the gloomy dining room, served by a waiter with a blue nose and the expression of a man whose last friend had been buried an hour before, Pícaro answered Foster’s rapid questions concerning himself and his plans.

“How about you, Brad?” he asked, when they had begun to smoke. “You’re married, I know. Are you permanently settled in New York?”

“You bet I am! It’s a great town, Píc—the only place for a man like me! Yes, I’m married. You remember Clara’s picture in my room in Boston? Well, she’s the biggest piece of luck that’s hit me so far. Take a tip from me—find a nice girl and hook up with her. . . . It’s something to work for—puts pep into a man. Ever hear of the Duplex? We’re not out your way yet, but we will be soon. It’s the best medium-weight job on the market. Say, I want to take you out to the factory. We’re in Long Island City—everything brand new. I’m assistant sales manager—funny job for an engineer, eh? Remember that course in salesmanship I took? Well, that put some ideas into my head and I interested the people I was with in Detroit. I was going strong there, and the Duplex people heard of me and offered me this job.”

“So you like New York?”

“Do I like it! Man, I eat it up! Detroit’s got the motor industry, but she’s small-town stuff beside this! Take a walk down Broadway. Look at the crowds, the life, the money people throw around. Some of ’em make it in other places, but they all bring it here to spend. I’m an American, and Broadway’s America—boiled down, speeded-up United States!”

“By the way, Bradley,” said Pícaro, with a little smile at his friend’s enthusiasm, “will you bring your wife to dinner with me to-night?”

“Sure thing. I want you to know her. Say, I’ve got to meet a Frenchman this evening. Nice fellow—brought a letter from the Ronsard people in France—and I’ve been showing him through the shop. You’ll be shipmates with him—he’s sailing on the same boat. Shall I bring him along? Clara knows him and he can talk English.”

"Yes, bring him along," said Pícaro, concealing a small sense of irritation. "Can you come to the hotel about seven o'clock?"

"Fine! Well, we'd better get going. I'll 'phone Clara and then we'll take a run over to the factory."

That evening, while he was changing for dinner, Langhorne wondered idly what manner of woman Foster had married. He had a memory of a vague Clara of their days at the institute, the recipient of enormous letters his friend was in the habit of composing on Sunday afternoons. There had been a portrait above Foster's desk—an artless photograph of a girl with an earnest face and hair brushed back to reveal a pair of well-developed ears. But this was one of the few subjects on which Bradley had been reticent.

It was a little odd, he thought, that Foster had not asked him to his house—or did they have an apartment? Pícaro realized suddenly that his friend's establishment had not been mentioned once. Foster had left him at five o'clock to go home and fetch his wife. "Clara's long on culture," he had remarked, with a hint of solemnity in his voice. "Don't shy off if she begins to pull the highbrow stuff."

The telephone was buzzing to inform him that his guests were below.

He found them in a corner of the lobby. Foster and the Frenchman rose as he approached, and the former—forgetting in his momentary embarrassment the counsels of the book of etiquette—murmured awkwardly: "Meet my wife, Píc . . . and this is Mr. Orsay, the engineer from Ronsard Frères."

Pícaro found himself bowing to a young woman rather conspicuously turned out. Her face was plain, and the ears of the photograph were concealed under elaborately dressed hair. She wore eyeglasses with narrow rims of tortoise shell, and her gown, of some vivid green material, was alarmingly low cut. A light wrap partially concealed her shoulders and arms.

"I've been hearing about you for a long time," she remarked, pronouncing the second word in a manner Pícaro detested on American lips.

He murmured a banal word or two, removed his eyes with difficulty, and turned to take the Frenchman's hand. What a woman to be Bradley Foster's wife!

"I'm told," the foreigner was saying in a pleasant English voice, "that we are to cross together on the *Ville de Bordeaux*. I shall enjoy the company of an American colleague."

Pícaro was recovering his wits. He saw that Orsay was a slender man of his own age, with a thin, dark, and ascetic face, relieved by brown eyes sparkling with intelligence. He wore an excellent dinner coat, and his manner was urbane without effusiveness.

"I think our table is ready," Pícaro said to Mrs. Foster a moment later.

“Shall we go in now?”

“Our friend is to be thanked for the best part of my trip,” the Frenchman was saying to him, when they had found their table in the crowded and over-ornate restaurant. “His factory is the most modern I’ve seen, so far as fine work is concerned. We can’t build cars in series as your cheaper automobiles are put together in Detroit.”

But Clara was waiting her chance, and they were not destined to speak of technical affairs. “You won’t mind if I change the subject, *Monsieur* Orsay,” she observed in a colorless and penetrating voice, giving an atrocious twist to the single word of French, “but I’m so anxious to know your impressions of America! Now our women . . .”

Clara’s husband glanced at Pícaro and gazed back at his wife admiringly. It was as though he had said aloud: “She’s off. Now we’ll have some real conversation!” Langhorne took the opportunity for a closer look at the woman beside him. Her hair was the color of honey—thick, straight, and lusterless. Her complexion was fresh and her shoulders and arms pretty, though somewhat over-exposed, now that the wrap was gone, but her face had neither strength nor beauty, and the rather prominent light-blue eyes framed in her absurd pince-nez were devoid of feminine allure. She wore about her neck a string of imitation jade beads, with an outlandish pendant of the same material.

If Pícaro had been able to look into the future, he would have perceived that this woman was the forerunner of hundreds who were to repopulate the neighborhood of Washington Square—of a type then in short skirts in numberless hamlets of the basin drained by the Father of Waters. He would have smiled a little at their absurdity, and he might, perhaps, have perceived the pathos of this exodus of the daughters of farmers, doctors, small politicians, and the keepers of country stores. They would be in revolt against the monotony of prairie life; their cult would be culture, their watchword radicalism, and their religion art. But Langhorne had no gift of second sight, and he gazed at his friend’s wife as Sir Harry Johnston—eleven years before, in the forests of Semliki—must have gazed at his first okapi. . . .

Pícaro slept late next day and awoke to learn that the *Titanic* had gone down. At lunch with Foster and the Frenchman, his friend could speak of nothing else. Bradley was filled with horror at the thought that such a disaster was possible.

“What good’s our civilization,” he exclaimed, “if this sort of thing’s going to happen? What good are the scientists, the inventors, the engineers, if these great modern vessels are allowed to sink at sea? She was supposed to be unsinkable, too, with all those water-tight compartments! Hell! If we’d built her in America, I’ll bet she wouldn’t have gone down!”

"Wait till to-morrow," put in Pícaro, soothingly; "you'll know more about it then." But Foster's imagination was profoundly stirred—disquieted at this glimpse of old realities encroaching on a mechanical world.

"More than a thousand people drowned," he muttered. "Think how they must have suffered! Unsinkable! Hell!"

"Let's hope," remarked Orsay, lightly, "that the *Ville de Bordeaux* has better luck! I, for one, do not know how to swim! But perhaps we'd better get aboard. We're to sail at two o'clock."

Langhorne had chosen the one-class boat for the sake of economy, and he was pleased at the cleanness of his stateroom, at the wide decks and comfortable saloons. The Fosters accompanied them to the dock, and for some time after the faces of the crowd had blurred he could distinguish the handkerchief waved by the eccentric Clara. He found Orsay in the smoking room with an armful of newspapers and a cigarette.

"Sit down," he remarked, making room for Pícaro on the leather-upholstered seat. "I've enjoyed New York, but it is better to turn one's back abruptly. I don't like long farewells. Will you have a liqueur if I can find the steward?"

Pícaro shook his head, smiling up from the task of filling his pipe.

"Another time, then. I learned from Foster that you are bound for France on the same errand which brought me to America."

"You came to study our motor industry, I believe. I'm more interested in light engines for aviation. There should be a great deal to learn in France."

"Yes, your Wrights were the pioneers, but we've developed the science they originated. Our government does more than yours, perhaps, to encourage such things, for France must always be ready for war, and the airplane has military possibilities."

"I hope they'll let me have a look at what they're doing. To tell the truth, I've been working for more than a year on an engine of my own design. But there are still difficulties and I hope your engineers will show me how to overcome them."

As a rule, Pícaro made up his mind slowly, but his first glance at Orsay had inspired him with liking and trust. Now he discovered that the other was versed in the matters which engrossed him, and they talked till it was time to go on deck for a last view of the land . . . spoke of motors radial and rotary, of weight per horse power, of oiling systems and alloys of aluminum.

The *Ville de Bordeaux* was not a fast ship, but this was Langhorne's first crossing, and in spite of his thoughts of Rita, far off on the shore of another sea, and the depression he felt sometimes at night when he lay sleepless in his berth, he was able to enjoy the leisurely passage to France. Orsay was at home, for he had come to America on the same boat. He had the steward seat Pícaro

next to him at the captain's table; he introduced him to the chief engineer, who showed them through his steamy haunts below; morning and evening they walked the customary mile.

With the Frenchman Pícaro was developing one of those quick intimacies which spring up at sea. He and Orsay were of an age, but the other seemed mature beyond his years. He had the detached and ironic intelligence of France, equally free from illusions and from sentiment, and in talking with this young man, Pícaro caught glimpses of a larger world, of a point of view giving on wider horizons than he had known. Late one night, in the deserted smoking room, Orsay spoke of himself. A steward dozed at a table near by, head resting on his arms; the sea was calm; there was a chill in the damp air which blew in through the door; and the woodwork creaked in time to the pulsing of the screw.

"My name is not a common one," Orsay observed, striking a match to light a fresh cigarette. "Well, I'm a grandson—left handed, I admit—of the Count d'Orsay who was Byron's admirer, a gentleman who managed to enjoy life in those days—a sort of arbiter of fashion in England and on the Continent, with a taste for art and a discriminating eye for women. My existence is due to this latter quality, which led him into a flirtation with an English girl, the daughter of a respectable City family. There was never any question of marriage—perhaps you've heard of Lady Blessington?—and the family suspected nothing until it became evident that my father was about to make his bow to the world. Then my grandmother developed a weakness of the chest and was sent off with a trusted old nurse, such as all English families possess, to breathe the air of the Italian Riviera. In San Remo, at the house of a doctor noted for delicacy in handling such affairs, my father was born, and presently his mother took leave of him and returned to the fogs of her own country—her consumption averted and her figure improved by the Italian air. She married afterward, most respectably—an alderman, I believe.

"The curious, the almost unique feature of the affair was that the family felt a species of secret pride in the *liaison*. The count was a celebrity, remember, one of the handsomest men of his day, and noted for an extraordinary personal charm. This furtive interest proved an auspicious circumstance for my father. The old merchant provided for him liberally after Count d'Orsay's ruin and flight to France, and when he died his son had the boy brought up like a young nobleman, educated him in English schools, and provided him with an income when he came of age.

"My father was in some respects a singular man. I knew him only in the afternoon of his life, but when he was young his taste for adventure must have led him into some curious scrapes. He was at once an aristocrat and an ardent Republican—an individualist so contemptuous of public opinion that he spoke

proudly of his father and made jokes about the bar-sinister another man would have taken care to conceal. He was with Garibaldi in Naples when Victor Emanuel was proclaimed king; and though the Second Empire never had his approval, he hastened, in 1870, to offer his services to France. My mother was a Spanish dancer on whom the Empress Eugénie had promised to settle a dowry, but in spite of the fact that she was left without an engagement or a sou, my father married her in the midst of the Commune, and lived happily with her for nearly twenty years. I was born long after they had given up hopes of a child.

"We lived in Paris till I was ten years old, with an occasional trip to Italy or to Spain. Then my mother died and my father made up his mind that England was the place for a boy. He was a British subject, by the way—an odd John Bull—and when I was born he had me registered at the consulate.

"In our lodgings in London, while we were occupied with the question of a school, my granduncle paid us a furtive visit one day—a very old man, with pink cheeks, white whiskers, and a trembling lip. He took me by the shoulders and kissed me. I remember the faint contempt inspired by the sight of a tear trickling down one side of his nose. 'That, *mon petit*,' my father observed, when the old gentleman was gone, 'is your granduncle—a very worthy man. Should he come again, be more respectful, for it is due to him that we enjoy three meals a day!'

"I was eight years in England. My father returned to the Paris of Felix Faure, and I fear that his life there was not all it might have been. I visited him during my vacations, and found him installed in an apartment on the left bank of the Seine, with a housekeeper singularly youthful for her post. He developed a passion for gambling at this time, and it was curious to observe how the housekeeper disappeared on the day when the last of his quarterly remittance took wings! But I must do him justice—my allowance and school fees were never once forgotten.

"In my childhood a taste for mechanisms resulted in an experiment which ruined a valuable watch. At eighteen I entered the Polytechnique, but deciding that I cared nothing for ordnance and did not wish to become a manufacturer of tobacco, I changed to the École des Arts et Métiers. That proved theoretical in the extreme, so I ended my studies at Châlons, in the school which turns out the best engineers of France. It was on the day of my last examination that the telegram came.

"I found my father dying of an affection of the kidneys. He was not an old man, but he had amused himself, and now he was paying the bill. As usual in times of emergency, the housekeeper was gone. 'You're just in time, Gabriel,' he remarked, as I sat down by the bed. 'I'm about to die and I have bad news for you before I go. My uncle has preceded me by a fortnight, and his end was

so sudden that he did not have time to set his affairs in order. That good old man was about to arrange that in case of my death the income should be transferred to you; but now he is gone, and the money, alas! will cease when I draw my last breath. So you will have to fend for yourself, like a good Republican! There are twelve hundred francs in the pocket of my coat. I owe a small score here and there in the cafés—the concierge will tell you where. There will be a few louis left when you have paid the rent and these debts . . . that is all, save my blessing, and a piece of advice which will make you a rich man. Trust no woman and never play! I except your mother, for with her that species of angel is extinct!'

"Picture to yourself my situation! I spoke English, German, Spanish, and French; I possessed excellent notes from the best technical school in France; I was twenty-three years old, healthy and without vices . . . and for six months I was so close to starvation that I dream of it still! At last I perceived that the world had no place for a young engineer without friends, so I dressed myself roughly—it required no great effort, I assure you!—and contrived to find work in the factory of Ronsard Frères, at Neuilly—machinist's helper, at a wage which gave me socialist leanings within a month. Barely in time to preserve my Republican principles, I was promoted to a lathe of my own, for business was good and the foreman had questioned me as to my understanding of the work.

"That was five years ago. Since then, I have discovered that education is not wholly a farce. My father bequeathed me an inquiring mind and the schools taught me to think in orderly ways. Little by little I have advanced. The Ronsards are planning radical changes for next year; they sent me to America to pick up what I could, and when I return, the design of their new model will be intrusted to me. You have made wonderful strides in manufacturing. In France we do not know what it is to plan a car with a view to production in quantity. But sometimes, you know, I sicken of a life which begins and ends to the humming of machinery. What the devil! We only live once. I've often wished that I'd run off to sea as a boy—or to the colonies!"

He folded his arms and leaned back, glancing at Pícaro with the faintest of ironic smiles. Langhorne sat with an ankle resting on his knee, while he knocked out his pipe with gentle taps against the heel of his boot. Orsay interested and puzzled him. Here was a man who spoke with extraordinary frankness of intimate things—things which at home would not be mentioned at all. Yet Pícaro suspected all the time that deep down in the other, behind the mocking and detached personality his words disclosed, there was a barrier of reserve.

"I envy you," remarked the American, with a sigh. "Your life has been more interesting than mine, and as for our profession, I'm a beginner without

practical experience."

"What are your plans, if it is not indiscreet to ask?"

"They are vague enough. First of all, though what you say has not encouraged me, I must find work which will give me a living. I have a little money, but I'd rather keep that in reserve. Then, in whatever time I have to myself, I hope to go on with my designs and eventually to build my first motor for trial."

"Come! Nothing is impossible to an American! Perhaps the difficulties will not be so great. . . . I might even be of service to you when the time comes."

One cool gray morning, under the veils of mist shrouding an oily sea, Pícaro sighted the coast of France. The pilot came aboard; they entered the Garonne and moved upstream between flat banks, beyond which the *landes* stretched off to vanish in the fog. He stood by the rail, at Orsay's side, his mind filled with sudden new trains of thought. At home, history began with the Spanish settlements, or with the Pilgrim Fathers on the eastern coast, but now, gazing at this soil on which Roman had conquered Gaul, and breathing this air which had once resounded with the twang of bowstrings, he became aware of the background of the race.

Presently, as they drew alongside the quay, he saw the town—the gray buildings and plane trees of the Place de Quinconces, the low white houses and the narrow streets. Orsay helped him through the customs; they checked their trunks to Paris and went off to breakfast and stroll about the town.

That day was one that lingered in Pícaro's memory: Bordeaux, the long railway journey, flying through the ordered French countryside; evening—the clustering lights flitting past as they entered the suburbs of Paris. He had asked Orsay about a hotel, and the other had mentioned the names of one or two modest places. Now the speed was slackening and the passengers in their compartment were rising to take down their luggage from the nets. Orsay turned to him suddenly.

"Why not put up with me?" he asked. "I have an apartment and I'd be glad to have you. Don't bother about a hotel until you know what you are going to do."

CHAPTER FIVE

Orsay's rooms, at the top of one of the numerous small apartment buildings which have sprung up since the year of the Exposition, were close to the Neuilly Gate, three minutes from the Avenue de la Grande Armée. There were two bedrooms, a diminutive *salon*, a dining room, a kitchen, a bath, and a sort of cubbyhole into which the servant retired at night.

Pícaro was whistling as he dressed; he had slept well and this morning the world seemed brighter than for many weeks past. Through the open window he had glimpses of a cloudless sky; sparrows chirped and squabbled outside; he could hear Orsay stropping his razor in the bathroom; there was a scent of roasting coffee in the air.

Presently he heard quick, heavy steps and a knock at his door. "*Entrez!*" he called—his first word of French since school days.

Antoinette was standing in the doorway, smiling at her employer's friend. She was a square-built woman of fifty, with red hands, fiery cheeks, and small blue eyes, twinkling with good humor.

"*Bon jour, monsieur,*" she said, in a voice singularly soft and agreeable. "*Le café est prêt.*"

The door of the bathroom opened and Orsay appeared in a dressing gown. "Hello, Antoinette!" he called: "I swear to thee that it does me good to hear thy voice once more! So the coffee is ready. Well, we're ready, too!"

The dining room was not more than ten feet square, but it was a cheerful little place, with flowers on the table, fresh blue-and-white paper on the walls, and an east window to admit the sun. There were poached eggs, a pot of marmalade from Scotland, curls of sweet golden butter, and an urn of such coffee as Pícaro had never known. Antoinette bustled between them and the kitchen, maintaining a flow of talk in her soothing voice, which grew articulate when she came in to replenish the plate of toast, and died away to a murmur as she left the room.

"She is formidable, eh?" remarked Orsay, with a grin at the unceasing murmur from beyond the open door. "It's her only defect, but you will grow used to it in time. Perhaps you don't understand. She's giving us the history of the quarter since I've been away: I don't know why I should be interested in the Joubert divorce, or the obstetrical features of Madame Renaud's confinement, or the failure of the Café Périgord, but talk is old Antoinette's one luxury, and I haven't the courage to protest! She used to live in Châlons. She and her husband kept a small hotel where I lived during my days at school. One becomes attached to her; when her good man died I found myself able to

afford an apartment and a *femme de ménage*, so I persuaded her to come and keep house for me. She was lonely, for she is Parisian born and her children were scattered in the colonies. She might prove valuable to you. Unlike the phonographs used to teach languages, she doesn't require winding up! But I must go out to Neuilly and report myself. May I suggest what I'd do if I were in your place? First of all, you'll need to learn French and to go about among the makers of engines for aircraft. Why not resolve to take a month of leisure, at least; to let your ears grow accustomed to our language, to stroll about Paris, and to visit the manufacturers to whom I'll give you letters to-night? I wish I had time to be of greater service, but from now on I'll be busy in the drafting room. Whenever you're ready, we'll talk of finding a place. I breakfast here at seven, lunch at the works, and dine at a café on the avenue. We'll breakfast and dine together when you're in town, eh? But I must be off. I'm late."

Orsay had kept his promise and handed the American a sheaf of letters, headed with the name of Ronsard Frères, introducing him to a dozen manufacturers, in the environs of Paris, at Lyons, at Clermont-Ferrand. The name of Ronsard opened all doors to him; he was received courteously by men who spoke his language and showed interest in the American engineer. What were the Wrights doing nowadays? And Curtiss—was his new motor a success? They had not forgotten the meet at Reims, three years before.

Paris seemed the gayest city in the world. If cruelty and squalor were there, he did not perceive them; he saw only the animation of the boulevards, the children with their nurses playing along the Champs-Elysées, the promenaders in the Bois de Boulogne, the pretty girls who seemed to smile at him wherever he went. Sometimes, on mornings when he felt lazy and remembered his French, he spent an hour listening to Antoinette, who proved a teacher full of enthusiasm. Pícaro had spoken Spanish from childhood and he was gifted with a throat and an ear for languages. One day, with a curious suddenness, his ears seemed to open—he could understand. His progress began with that time and he was speaking within another month, putting in broken comments on Antoinette's interminable yarns, and no longer shy of exchanging remarks with a chance acquaintance in a café.

Close to the Metro station on the avenue, there were two café-restaurants: the Cyclistes and the Cochers. The latter was a humble little place, frequented by taxi drivers and old-fashioned Parisian cabbies in their patent-leather hats. But an excellent light lunch, with a glass of beer, was to be had for one franc fifty, and Pícaro lunched there whenever noon found him in his own quarter. The other restaurant was more pretentious, with large striped awnings superbly fringed and bearing the legend, "Café des Cyclistes," above the tables outside, and a vista of leather-upholstered lounges and walnut chairs as one entered the

door. The portraits of famous six-day racers on the walls indicated the tone of the clientele—*le sport* which the French had begun to take so seriously. Here were to be seen the kings of the wooden track, men with stooped shoulders, hard faces, and bulging calves, stared at by admiring newsboys as they swaggered in or out, chattering in their unintelligible argot, with the faint self-consciousness of public men. There were usually a prize fighter or two, a scattering of journalists with ears open for items of the track or ring, and a background of women who called to the men familiarly, using odd nicknames like "Kiki," and "Popaul." Scattered among the tables one saw quietly dressed men from other quarters of the town, attracted by certain dishes for which the Café des Cyclistes was known. It was here that Orsay dined, always at the same table, served by the same cadaverous Emil.

One evening in June, when Emil had cleared the dishes away and they had lighted their cigarettes, Orsay turned to Pícaro with a hint of embarrassment in his manner.

"It is not my affair," he said, "but would it be indiscreet to ask whether you have begun to think of finding work? You told me once . . ."

The American glanced up with a smile. "By no means," he replied: "Thanks to your letters, I've seen all there is to be seen, and only last night I made up my mind that I must begin to support myself. What money I brought with me is in the bank. When the time comes to build my motor I'll need all I can scrape together!"

Orsay leaned toward his friend. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Then I can tell you what's in my mind. Listen. I took the liberty, not long ago, of mentioning you to the younger of the Ronsards. This is a busy year, and we shall need at least two more draftsmen immediately. What do you say to taking one of these places? We would be together, and if there were things you did not understand at first, it would be a pleasure to help. The pay is not princely—twelve francs fifty a day—but one must begin somewhere, after all. I've thought it over carefully. On three hundred francs a month one could live as we are living now, your share of the apartment, since you have insisted on paying it, lunch at Neuilly, and a dinner here. You'll not desert me, eh? The place would be lonely without you, and as for Antoinette, I don't know what she'd do! Come, what do you say?"

Pícaro held out his hand. The gesture and the smile in his eyes were an answer in themselves. "I'm ready to begin to-morrow!" he said.

Later in his life Pícaro looked back almost with regret on those days at Neuilly, on those evenings at the apartment by the Porte Maillot. He had never before known the meaning of poverty, and he found a certain exhilaration in being forced to count his pennies, in denying himself things he had once taken

for granted, in sharpening his wits with plans to make two ragged ends meet. Three hundred francs was a small sum on which to exist for a month, but he had plenty of clothes, he learned to live on inexpensive food, he got his exercise in walking back and forth to his work, and he soon found that it was possible to have a few francs left over at the end of the month. After all, the majority of mankind existed on less!

He and Orsay rose at half past six, breakfasted at the apartment, walked the two miles to their work in thirty minutes, lunched on a loaf, a sausage, and a glass of milk, walked home at five, and dined at the Café des Cyclistes. The Frenchman had a few friends scattered about Paris, and he was often away in the evening, sometimes remaining overnight. Langhorne now had all the data he needed, and his evenings were spent at a table in the little *salon*, busy with the designs of his motor. When Orsay was at home he often drew up a chair to watch Pícaro at work, and as time went on he grew more and more interested —suggesting, criticizing, discussing with the other the solution of each difficulty as it arose. Pícaro found him a shrewd critic—practical, full of originality, and skilled in the metallurgy which was his own weakest point. Sometimes they argued all evening on such problems as the lift and dwell of valves, the limits of compression, the clearance of pistons, or the efficient speed of air propellors.

One night Orsay laid on the table a sample of dull whitish metal. “A new alloy,” he remarked. “Jules Ronsard gave it to me to-day and said we might use the laboratory if we wished to make tests. It may be what we are seeking for our pistons; it is very light, yet the coefficient of expansion differs little from that of iron.”

Pícaro took up the block of metal and weighed it in his hand. The other’s words had given him an idea.

“I have something to propose to you,” he said. “But first of all, what do you think of this motor. Has it possibilities’? Tell me frankly!”

“Frankly, then, it has—or I should not be interested.”

“If it were built and performed on the testing-block as I hope it will—do you think that it might prove a commercial success?”

“That’s a question harder to answer. But I know that our government is alive to the military possibilities of the air, and if the authorities were shown an aëro-motor better than any now in use, it is conceivable that contracts might result.”

“In that case I’ll make my proposal. What do you say to a partnership? We could finish the design together, work together in the building of the first motor, and join forces, if all went well, to form a company for manufacturing it on a commercial scale. I have confidence in this affair, Orsay, and I believe that together we might accomplish what would be difficult for one alone!”

The Frenchman did not reply at once. He was sprawled with an elbow hooked over the back of his chair; his eyes were half closed, and the cigarette in his hand sent up a rapid spiral of smoke. Finally he looked up at Pícaro with one of his faint smiles.

"I'd like nothing better," he said. "Your enthusiasm has infected me, and, like yourself, I feel confident of success. Besides, I'd like to see our theories put to the test! Your offer is over-generous, perhaps, and I feel some diffidence about accepting it. . . . Still, my savings might prove useful. Yes, I accept with joy! The truth is that your infernal motor has gripped my imagination!" He was silent for a moment and Pícaro saw an expression of amusement creep over his dark, lean face.

"Our partnership begins auspiciously," he went on, with a broadening smile; "You may have observed that this week I've spent all my evenings at home. Well, from now on half my income and all my spare time will be at the service of Langhorne and Orsay! There's no reason why I should not tell you the story. It illustrates the truth of my father's last words of advice.

"Her name is Annette; I ran across her at St. Cloud one Sunday two years ago. I was lonely, I was getting on in the world, and perhaps I was no more of a fool than other young men. She had been a *mannequin* in one of the establishments on the Rue de la Paix, and as business was dull they had shown her the door, with promises that she would be recalled when their affairs improved. She is neither old nor hideous, and that type of woman knows how to make the most of what nature gives. But I mustn't abuse her; she taught me a lesson my father didn't learn in sixty years!

"*Eh bien*—I established her in a charming little apartment in Passy, with a servant, with furniture, with more frocks than I could afford. What would you have? My own expenses were nothing, and we are all cursed with an instinct for something to pamper, something to protect! A year passed before my eyes began to open, before I began to realize, vaguely at first, but more clearly with each month that went by, that my Annette was a veritable leech. 'Well,' I thought, 'she is perhaps not unlike the rest of her sex. . . . I am lonely and she amuses me; I shall not detach my leech as long as it is not indiscreet.'

"Since you have been here my visits to Passy have been less frequent than formerly. Last Saturday mademoiselle presented me with one or two rather exaggerated bills. I chided her on her extravagance, we had words, and in my agitation I came away without remembering that my overcoat was in the hall. A friend of my father's had asked me to spend Sunday with him in the country. At seven o'clock on Sunday morning I remembered my coat. I found a taxi, hastened to Annette's apartment, and knocked loudly at the door. For a moment all was silence; then I heard soft footsteps inside and the servant's agitated voice. 'Mademoiselle suffers terribly,' she whispered through the

door; ‘her head is splitting, and she asks if monsieur will run to the chemist’s for some aspirin and hasten back. I’m putting hot towels on her head and can’t leave her.’ The steps receded and I turned down the stairs, suspecting nothing. After all, I was fond of her.

“I walked briskly to the chemist’s, hastened back in concern, and came face to face with an officer of *Chasseurs Alpins*, who was running downstairs with the air of a man about to catch a train. I stopped, struck by a sudden idea. I held up my hand courteously. ‘Captain,’ I asked, ‘would it be too much to ask a moment’s friendly conversation?’ He stopped, for I was squarely in the way. ‘Be brief, monsieur,’ he replied. ‘I am pressed, as you will perceive!’ ‘I’m indiscreet, without doubt,’ I went on, ‘but I ask you, nevertheless, if Mademoiselle Annette Corlay is numbered among your acquaintances?’ This captain was a good fellow, without the ability to lie, and I was smiling. In spite of himself, he blushed, his eyes twinkled, and he smiled. I bowed and stood aside. ‘You have answered me,’ I said. ‘I’m honored to learn that you and I are relatives of a sort!’

“Well, that’s finished. There were no scenes, no drama, no tears. I posted a note to Annette, telling her that, so far as the apartment was concerned, she had three months in which to find another friend. Since there was no reply, I hope for her sake that the captain has agreed to step into my shoes. As for me, the experience has been of value, and from now on I shall be free to work with you.”

Pícaro’s duties at the Ronsard factory were performed with a sort of mechanical efficiency which brought him small increases of pay, but his heart was not in the work. He remembered the drafting of endless details for Orsay’s new model—the day when the designs were complete—the congratulations of the directors—the designing of new machinery to manufacture certain parts. But his real absorption—the inner life which tinctured his dreams and saved him from too-frequent thoughts of home and Rita du Quesne—was in his own work.

Early in the new year the partners rented a corner in a Neuilly machine shop, ten minutes’ walk from the fortifications, and began the building of the first Langhome-Orsay motor. The designs were complete, the list of patents applied for, and they were face to face with the most discouraging and costly part of their task. They worked on Sundays, on holidays, by night after exhausting days at the factory. Patents were expensive, they discovered, and three-quarters of Pícaro’s reserve at the bank dwindled away in lawyers’ fees. He had resolved to fight his battle without aid from home, but there were times when he felt his determination weakening. Neither he nor Orsay was of the type which attempts to borrow without security, and they had to make the best

of a disheartening task—stopping their work for the time being when they had no more money to pay the pattern-makers, the founders, the furnishers of special steel. Months passed—tedious months of filing, fitting, grinding, polishing, turning out parts on the lathe. Emil, the cadaverous waiter at the Café des Cyclistes, waited in vain for his old client; that young engineer, formerly so meticulous in dress and fond of an old bottle with his sole, was now to be found among the cabbies at the Café des Cochers across the way . . . dressed like a mechanician, eating rapidly with his American friend, and gesticulating or holding aloft a glass of beer in a hand not free from traces of grime.

The mails brought few letters. Blaise never wrote; once each month the major posted a letter to his son—long, kindly, formal accounts of happenings at the ranch, in the father's clear handwriting of a bygone day. Now and then there was a letter from Bradley Foster—a typewritten sheet or two, full of business and the phenomenal success of Foster's selling campaigns, with his signature at the bottom, and his initials in the lower left-hand corner, followed by the initials of some secretary or stenographer. Once, by some mistake no doubt, one of his letters was stamped, "Dictated, but not read." Rita did not write often, but her infrequent letters caused Pícaro to study the arrivals of steamers from America, and to hasten homeward at night, eager for the first glimpse of the tray in the entry.

One evening in autumn, eighteen months after his arrival in France, when the first Langhorne-Orsay—spotless in gray enamel, nickel, and aluminum—stood ready for testing on its bench in the dingy Neuilly shop, Pícaro found a long letter from the girl at home.

> This is the warmest November for years [she wrote]. I'm in your room, writing at your old desk. Everyone else is in bed and I have a creepy feeling that if I turned around suddenly I'd find you reading by the lamp. It's the same in the afternoons when I come here alone to dust—you fairly haunt this room, Píc! Everything is just as you left it; your guns are on the rack—I oiled them the other day—and there's even a piece of scratch paper by the inkwell, covered with your pencil marks.
>
> Thanks for your letters. Please write me often. Your friend Orsay sounds attractive, and I know I would love old Antoinette. You say nothing about your work. Is it going well? I wish I could fly across to France to-night, surprise you in the little apartment you describe, and find out whether you are really comfortable. Do you get plenty of good food—or do you gobble up quick, unwholesome lunches? Bob Tisdale says that all Americans eat too fast.

Bob motored down this morning and spent the day. The major was glad to see him and they had a long talk after lunch. I'll tell you a secret—his visit was the result of a little conspiracy of mine. I haven't told you before because I didn't want to worry you, but your father has aged a good deal since you have been away and his eyes have been troubling him. Blaise and I have tried to persuade him to see an oculist in the city, but you know how he is; he only smiled and shook his head. Well, I told Bob about it, last time I saw him in town, and he agreed to run down for the day and try to bring up the subject casually. The major's sight is so dim that he hasn't been out shooting once this fall, and when Bob got to talking with him, and suggested that a pair of glasses would probably enable him to enjoy the sport he's so keen about, he promised to let Blaise take him to town for an examination. I hope the doctor is right! Poor old dear—he's had Young Julius drive him down to the ponds a dozen times, and it wrung my heart to see no gun in the spring wagon.

Everyone is well here at the ranch. Julius is very old, of course; I was glad when your father told him to give up trying to serve at table. He was pleased as a child with your letter—I read it aloud to him, and I know he carries it about in his pocket all day long. Domingo limps up to me every few days to ask if I have heard from you. Concha is fatter than when you left; she can scarcely walk nowadays, and when she does she waddles like an overfed duck! Do you remember their daughter, Lupita? She's grown extraordinarily pretty. The young men are crazy about her; there have been two or three fights already, but now there are rumors that Montez, the Lower California Mexican, has warned the others off. Do you remember him—a picturesque bandit who was breaking the young horses when you were here? Domingo has a great respect for him, and father told me a while ago that he was planning to make him a sort of assistant foreman. He strikes me as a rather murderous individual.

Last week I got the major to let me have Young Julius and men enough to haul up the old *Gaviota*. Then little Julius and I scrubbed her bottom and gave her two coats of copper paint! I never tried painting before, but I love it; I think to-morrow we'll touch up her deck and topsides. I've been doing a lot of sailing. Little J. adores coming with me and we have the funniest talks! He is easily the most amusing person on the ranch.

Blaise doesn't care for sailing, but he seems to be more and more interested in the ranch. You remember how often he used to go to

San Francisco and how fond he was of society—of gay people and house parties and balls? He seems to have changed since you went away. I forgot to tell you, I think, that two or three weeks after you left, his friends the Fergusons were motoring through southern California, and he got father's permission to ask them to spend a few days at the ranch. There were no gayeties, of course, but Blaise organized a *vaqueros* dance and took them riding all over the place. They seemed to enjoy themselves. I was sorry that I didn't have more to say to them; they are very gay and a little fast, I should think, though not in the unpleasant sense of the word, and people of that kind find me dull. They were trying to persuade Blaise to go North for the polo this winter—it seems he's one of the best polo men in the state—but for some reason he wasn't at all keen.

I oughtn't to bother you with my little worries, but I am worried about your father and Blaise. It began about a month after the Fergusons had left. I don't know what it is about, but there is some trouble between them. One night, when scarcely a word had been spoken at dinner, I left them to smoke in the dining room, and as I went out the door I couldn't help hearing the major say in an odd voice, "Come into my study, Blaise, when you've finished your cigar; I've something to say to you." Presently I heard them walk to the study and close the door on the gallery. A quarter of an hour later Blaise came out frowning and walked off to his room without saying good night. Since then they have been very cool and even more polite than usual. . . . I can't imagine what the trouble can be. I wonder if anyone—even his own father—really understands Blaise; in spite of his sleepy manner, he is fearfully proud and high-strung. He would never forgive an injury, I think, or quarrel twice with any man.

Well, Píc, I wish you were here to help me find out what this trouble is—I feel sure it is some little thing a kind word would straighten out. But you're six thousand miles away, and it is so late that I must say good night.

CHAPTER SIX

In the course of his two years with Ronsard Frères, Pícaro fell into a little custom of his own. On one night of every month he dressed himself in the regalia Orsay insisted on calling a "smoking," put a twenty-franc note in his pocket, and took the metro to the Place de la Concorde.

Antoinette looked forward eagerly to those nights. When the time came, and Pícaro let it be known that this evening he planned to play the gentleman, the old woman bustled about joyfully, putting studs in a shirt, laying out dinner coat, freshly polished boots, and trousers miraculously pressed. She was a little worried about her two young men—it was unnatural, she thought, to be so serious at their age. They would make themselves rich, without doubt, but a little pleasure now and then—*mon dieu!* there could be no harm in that! While Pícaro bathed in the steamy little bathroom, replying from time to time in monosyllables which reverberated with a hollow sound behind the closed door, Antoinette used to brush and polish in his room, maintaining in her soothing voice a flow of admonishment, of *faits divers*, of questions not meant to be answered.

"And to-night," she observed on one occasion, "you'll go to the Grand Guignol, *n'est-ce-pas*? A fine play. I've been reading about it! There's a doctor who gets rid of his Italian wife by sending her to a madhouse, where she is murdered by an attendant, who falls in love with her and goes insane. The doctor's mistress is the wife of a lion tamer, who discovers when it is too late that the murdered woman is her own sister, from whom she had been separated in childhood. The last scene is terrible. By a trick, she gets her lover into a cage with her fiercest lion, and locks the door. Then, while the man is torn to pieces behind the scenes, his mistress walks up and down the stage. They say the sounds are enough to congeal one's blood! Many women in the audience have been carried out!"

A chuckle came from the bathtub where Pícaro was scrubbing himself. "Listen, Antoinette," he shouted through the door. "One moment! I have something to say to thee!"

"I'm listening."

"*Eh bien*—go dress thyself in thy best and come with me. I invite thee to the most admirable dinner we can find, and to the Guignol afterward. Come! We shall hear thy lion roar and have our blood thoroughly curdled for once!"

"Ah, Monsieur Langhorne, you are a *farceur*!"

"But not at all! Come, do not spoil my evening with a refusal!"

"Perhaps, if I were twenty years younger . . . but I do not dare! No, I

cannot go. But you will tell me about it, eh? I pray you to forget nothing—to leave out no detail. This doctor and the lion tamer's wife remind me of the Jouberts—I told you of their divorce—he keeps the grocery on the Avenue de la Grande Armée. It was a sensational affair, I assure you. Madame Joubert had had her suspicions for a long time, and at last she caught them together—this father of a family with his pretty *midinette*. The grocer's wife is strong as a rhinoceros; she seized a poker and had nearly killed the pair when the police arrived. . . ."

When Pícaro emerged from the bathroom, in socks, underwear, and a dressing gown, Antoinette always remained, quite unabashed, till he was dressed and ready to go out. She fetched his hat and stick, helped him into his light overcoat, and when the door closed after him Orsay had heard her more than once muttering, "*Ah, qu'il est beau!*"

On these monthly expeditions into another world Pícaro always set out alone. To be alone in the midst of the Parisian crowds gave him a pleasure to which he looked forward from month to month. It was on the second or third excursion that he made the acquaintance of Fernand Pfeil.

He had dined before at a restaurant on the Rue Richelieu, but this evening he crossed the Place de la Concorde and strolled up the Rue Royal, toward the Madeleine. He was hungry, though it was not yet dinner time, and the crowded brightness of the Café de Séville caught his eye. He turned in, without stopping outside for an *apéritif*, sat down at a vacant table, and ordered a vermouth.

Pícaro's table was one of the immovable kind facing a long, leather-covered lounge—a comfortable seat where one could sip one's drink and watch the people come and go. The place began to fill as the dinner hour drew near, and when he told the waiter to bring him a second glass he saw that every table was taken. "Very well," he thought; "I shall dine here if others like the food so well!" He glanced up again. The head waiter stood facing him, bowing with clasped hands.

"Monsieur is dining here?"

"Yes, and you may tell the man that I am ready to order now." The Frenchman was bowing with an even more demonstrative courtesy.

"Monsieur will pardon, I hope . . . the waiter's oversight. This table is reserved . . . an old client, the Maître Pfeil, who dines here every night. If monsieur permits, I will find him an excellent place yonder!"

"But certainly," said Pícaro, not in the least put out. "I understand. Show me where I am to sit."

He was picking up his cigarette case when he heard a new voice, shrill and imperious: "Do not let this gentleman derange himself, Louis. There is room for two, and if he is not awaiting a friend, perhaps he will not mind my taking the place at his side." The newcomer was a man of fifty, small, slender, and

bald as an egg. Saving a pair of black eyebrows above glittering dark eyes, there was not a hair on his head. A nose like a hawk's beak overhung a thin, ironical mouth. He carried in his hand one of those green velour hats which disappeared with the outbreak of the war; and in his cravat Pícaro saw a scarf-pin set with a superb black pearl.

The stranger had advanced and was bowing to him, with a singularly agreeable smile. "You don't mind?" he asked in his shrill voice. Something in his manner attracted Pícaro and aroused his curiosity.

"With pleasure," he replied. "Since this is your table, it is I who should ask permission to remain."

The head waiter himself brought the cards while the table was being set, and hovered about the table, neglecting other diners while the Maître Pfeil chose food and wine deliberately, with the air of a man to whom dining is a serious affair. Pícaro ordered a simple meal with a bottle of Medoc; as he laid down the card the other turned to him.

"You must pardon an old man's curiosity," he said; "but tell me, monsieur, are you English or American?"

"American."

"Ah, that is good," observed Pfeil in English. "I like Americans." There was something bird-like in his quick glances and in the poise of his head.

"As for me," he went on, "I am a Jew—an Alsatian Jew. But I've lived in Paris so long that I have become a slave to all this." He waved his hand as if to indicate the waiters, the crowd, the gilded ceilings, the glare of electric light. "Yes, a slave! Beware of habits, young man—they are the curse of civilized life! Consider my case. I'm a bachelor, mind you, and I might have retired any day for ten years past. But I still go to my bureau every morning, though I shudder at the sight of my clerks, and at the dry smell of ink and documents. What a life! I rise at seven, drink a cup of coffee, and smoke one cigarette in my rooms, take the Metro to my office, lunch at Voisin's, drink my *apéritif* at the Grand Hotel, and dine at this table every night. Yet I was born to be an adventurer!" He sighed and took a spoonful of soup with an odd, pecking gesture.

Pícaro smiled. "Dining here," he observed, "is no great hardship, at any rate!"

"No! I'll tell you a secret. If one knows what to order, the Café de Séville provides the best dinner in all Paris! This *bisque d'écrevisse* . . . I marvel anew each time I taste it; and the cellar possesses some of the best white wines of France. But I've not seen you here before."

"I've passed the place, but this is the first time I've come in. My work is in Neuilly, where I have a desk in the drafting rooms of Ronsard Frères. Once each month I treat myself to an evening like this."

Pfeil glanced at Pícaro with one of his quick turns of the head. “Ah, I understand,” he said; “like me, you are something of a philosopher. You are young, you are intelligent, and you are making your way in the world. It’s a pleasure to meet one American, at least, who says that he is not a millionaire!”

Pícaro chuckled. “I’ll guarantee that!” he remarked, amused by the conversation with this eccentric companion.

Pfeil gave him an appraising glance of his bright black eyes. “Yet I’ll warrant, on my part, that you’ve never known what it is to be really poor. *Tiens!* I’ve a mind to tell you the story of my life. It is another of my bad habits; I always tell this story to strangers I meet on a sea voyage or in a café! I shall not bore you? No?

“Well, I was born in ’sixty, ten years before the war, in an Alsatian village among the Vosges. You don’t know Alsace? It’s a beautiful country, my friend; but the people of our valley were poor—ground down by the most sordid poverty. Our village was in a valley hemmed in by tall black mountains. I used to wonder what lay beyond those distant ridges, beyond those sky lines broken by thick forests of pine and fir. There was a rapid stream in the valley, and it furnished power for the cotton mill which was the property of the family in the château. They seemed to own everything in the place, except the souls of the people, and sometimes I suspected that even our souls belonged to Monsieur le Vicomte. I never laid eyes on him, by the way—my grandmother told me that he lived in a far-off city called Paris. My mother died when I was very young—I do not remember her. I lived with my father, who was an operative in the cotton mill, and his old mother kept house for us. When I was eight years old my father died from too many years of breathing the lint, and the old woman and I were left to fend for ourselves. I had learned my letters at school; now it was time to go to work at the mill (there was no agitation against child labor in those days), and on Saturday night I turned over my earnings to my grandmother. The winters are cold in the Vosges. I had little time to gather firewood, and the old woman was too feeble for such tasks.” Pfeil shuddered, as though he felt again the chill of forty-five years before.

“Ah! Those winter evenings!” he went on. “I wish I could forget them! We had no wood to waste, and we couldn’t afford oil for our lamp. When we had eaten our soup—a species of hot salted water in which floated bits of coarse bread—the old woman and I used to crawl into her great feather bed, and lie there, waking and sleeping till it was time for me to go to work. On Sundays I washed the rags we called our clothes; sometimes my grandmother refused me soap. I can see her now—her wrinkled face, red as an apple in its frame of untidy gray hair; her black eyes twinkling maliciously under swollen lids; her chin quivering with cold, and her toothless jaws held so that the lower lip overlapped the upper. ‘No soap this week, Fernand,’ she used to whine, as she

crouched in the doorway, holding out the bundle of dirty clothes. ‘Do thy best, my boy. Remember that we are not aristocrats!’ Aristocrats! Good God!

“The truth is that she was a miser, though I didn’t know it then. The war came, and within a week of the German occupation I awoke one morning to find my grandmother stiff and cold beside me. To this day I do not know why I shed tears—certainly the old woman had done nothing to make me love her. When I had closed her eyes and was setting the bed in order before I went to fetch a neighbor, my hand felt something hard, and I pulled out from between the mattresses a woolen stocking, heavy and clinking faintly when I moved it. I undid the string and poured out its contents on the bed—more than four thousand francs in gold! I was a boy of ten, remember, but I felt no elation, only a sudden weariness and disgust. As I concealed my find behind a loose brick in the chimney, I was thinking of those soapless days when I had scrubbed our clothing with raw, chapped hands.

“My hatred of avarice dates from that day. Until then I had been upheld by the protective instinct implanted in all of us; unattractive as the old woman was, she was at least my grandmother, and I had believed her in need. But her avarice had its good results, as you shall see.

“In spite of my name, I was not one of those Alsatians who welcomed the enemy, and I had one or two experiences which planted the seed of a second hatred in my life. It is curious, *hein*? A more miserable childhood than mine can scarcely be conceived. I had no reason to love my country, God knows, but the sight of the conquerors in our valley and the German discipline, the Teutonic organization encroaching on us . . . these things were galling even to the ragged boy of ten, brooding in the tumble-down house of his ancestors. I am an individualist—perhaps that is why I have always admired your country. At any rate, I learned in those days the meaning of patriotism!” The Jew raised his glass, glanced about the restaurant challengingly, and turned to Pícaro. “To the day when the statues are unveiled!” he exclaimed, “when the Lost Provinces are once more a part of France!”

His shrill voice, resonant as the powerful call of a bird, rang out above the hum and faint clatter of the diners. One or two people turned their heads; Pícaro saw a waiter smile, and surmised that this was not the first time the man had heard the Maître Pfeil propose his toast.

“Well,” he went on, “the housekeeper at the château, who had known my father, took pity on me and got me a place as a sort of helper to the gardener. It was heaven after the life to which I had been accustomed—pleasant work, a warm room, and three meals a day—but I had made up my mind to leave Alsace, and I devoted the evenings to reading. The good woman permitted me to sit by the stove while she sewed, and used to smuggle books out of the library. She must have taken down the first volumes that caught her eye, for

some of my reading was scarcely adapted to the mind of a boy!

"Rest assured that all this time my four thousand francs was safely hidden away. I did not change one louis of it till the day of my departure for France. I had been reared in a hard school!

"At the end of eight years I was second gardener. There was little I did not know of my art—for gardening is an art, and one I love to this day. In addition, I had read my way through the vicomte's musty library, save for certain works of which I could make neither head nor tail. I spoke German and French, and an old grammar had given me some knowledge of the construction of English, though it was not till later that I learned to speak your tongue. It was not easy to part from the housekeeper, whom I had grown to love, but when I was eighteen I made a bundle of my belongings—among which a certain old woolen sock was not forgotten—said good-by to the dependents of the château, and took the road for France. When I had crossed the frontier I swore to myself that my feet would never again touch the soil of Alsace until that soil was French!

"There is no need of telling you how I came to Paris and studied the law. It is enough to say that I was self-supporting before half of my little hoard was gone. It has been easy. Most men are fools—I am perhaps a little less of a fool than the others. . . ."

The Café de Séville was emptying. Many of the diners had left early for the theater, and as the night was warm others were going out for the stroll Parisians love. Pfeil set down his coffee cup. "Excuse me a moment," he said. "You do not mind?" Pícaro looked up and saw that a young woman was standing near by, glancing timidly at his companion. She was expensively dressed and she carried a little bag of gilt mesh, but her painted cheeks were pinched and there was no confidence in her eyes. The lawyer beckoned to her, patting the seat beside him with the other hand.

"Come, *ma petite*," he said; "sit down and tell Papa Pfeil thy trouble."

The girl smiled as she caught his eye, came forward eagerly, and sat down at his side. She shook her head when he offered a liqueur, leaned close to him, and began to speak in a rapid whisper, inaudible two yards off. From time to time Pfeil nodded sympathetically; finally his hand went to his pocket and he reached across to open the little gilded bag, put something inside, and close it with a faint snap. The girl rose, blinking her eyes.

"*Ah, que vous êtes gentil*," she said, softly. "*Bon soir, messieurs.*"

Pfeil turned to Pícaro. "You are thinking me an idiot, no doubt," he observed. "Well, perhaps I am! I know them all, and they are not nearly so bad as the good churchgoers would have us believe. That child supports a family of unfortunates by practicing the only trade she knows, and this week she has had

no luck. To pawn her clothes is out of the question, you understand; the small brothers and sisters are hungry at home, and she has not eaten to-day. She is losing her looks—and she knows it. What a world! I am an old sentimentalist, nevertheless. There is suffering wherever one goes . . . it is a weakness to take too seriously the troubles of others! But I must leave you. Another of my habits is a solitary walk each night the weather permits. I have enjoyed our dinner together. When may I hope to see you here again?"

"Next month," said Pícaro, rising to take the other's hand, "when I treat myself to another spree. I hope I'll find you here."

"That is certain. Come early and remember to sit down at this table—see, it is the third from the end. Ah, here is Louis. Listen, my good Louis. Monsieur will dine here a month from now. If he arrives before me, see that he is seated at my table, *hein*? Good night, then, till next month." The lawyer smiled, nodded, took his hat and stick from the man, and walked away with the hesitating and jerky step of a fowl.

The head waiter accompanied him to the door of the deserted restaurant, and presently he returned to inquire whether Pícaro's dinner had been to his liking. Evidently the Alsatian's friends were the friends of the house.

"It is only this evening," asked Louis, respectfully, "that monsieur has made the acquaintance of the Maître Pfeil?" He was a sleek, dark-eyed man of uncertain age, smooth-shaven and inclining to stoutness.

"This evening, as you saw," replied Pícaro, not averse to a little information concerning his new friend.

"An extraordinary character, monsieur—a *numéro* of the drollest! He is a Jew, as you perceive, but such a heart, such generosity!" Louis shook his head slowly to express a reverential admiration, and kissed his fingers to an imaginary gallery. "There are not ten amateurs in Paris with his knowledge of wines and cookery. His practice is enormous; he is a patriot who could have almost any public office for the asking; and though he gives away incredible quantities of money, he is rich. When he was younger he was a great patron of the theater; even now, if the Maître Pfeil is seen dining with an actress or a dancer, her fortune is made!"

Pícaro realized, with a little guilty start, that it was too late for the Guignol. Poor Antoinette—no doubt she was dreaming of his story of the lion and the Italian murderess! Well, it had been a pleasant evening and now he could walk home. The exercise would bring a good night's sleep and he would save the five francs which remained of his twenty. He chose to walk by the river bank and the Avenue Marceau, and as he strolled westward along the Cours la Reine he found that he looked forward with a sense of agreeable anticipation to his next meeting with the Maître Pfeil.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pícaro was idling in the Café des Cochers, sipping a glass of beer as he waited for Orsay to join him in an early dinner. He was in his working clothes, and he might have passed for a Parisian machinist of the more intelligent sort. The fingers of his left hand tapped the table nervously—his partner would soon bring word of Jules Ronsard's decision.

It was early evening. The short winter dusk was settling on the city, and here and there on the avenue the lights of motor-cars were beginning to appear. At this hour, when all Paris was homeward bound, there were few clients in the café. An old cabby with a bloated face and a purple, bulbous nose sat at a near-by table—a glass of beer standing beside his patent-leather hat. Through the front windows, on which Pícaro amused himself by deciphering the reverse of prices and advertisements, lettered in white, he could see a sad-eyed horse standing with sprung knees between the shafts of an ancient cab. Two or three taxis were drawn up beside the curb, and their hard-faced drivers sat about a table inside, speaking in low tones, in the clipped argot of the streets.

It had been an anxious day for the American. A fortnight before, he and Orsay had decided to show the Ronsards their motor, and to offer the brothers a half-share interest in return for the capital required to exploit it. Orsay had been reluctant, but since they knew no other capitalists, and the Ronsards were friends to a certain extent, it had seemed best to make the offer before going elsewhere. Jules Ronsard, the younger brother—a fattish man with plump white hands, a cropped mustache, and a pair of cold gray eyes—had shown a mild interest. He supervised a test at working speed, and afterward, when the motor was taken down, he inspected the parts for wear.

"It is interesting," he had remarked, indifferently, as he wiped his hands by the door of his limousine, outside the little shop; "but do not permit yourselves to hope too much. You inventors are all alike—if you succeed in building a motor which will actually run, you believe that your fortunes are made! A motor must do more than run . . . it must sell! Take the day off to-morrow and bring your *moulin* out to the works. I shall be better able to judge when I have seen its performance on the dynamometer."

Early that morning they had hired a truck and taken the Langhorne-Orsay motor to the factory. While a little group of experts gathered about, they bolted it to the greasy testing blocks, and adjusted the connection for water and gasoline. The motor coughed, spluttered, and burst into a deep trampling roar. It was rated at 180 horse power, and Pícaro's heart leaped as he opened the throttle and watched the indicator move upward in little jerks. One hundred

seventy—one hundred eighty—one hundred ninety—two hundred—two hundred ten . . . two hundred twelve! "*Coupez!*" Jules Ronsard had shouted, his voice faintly heard above the thundering exhaust. "Enough! I am deafened by your infernal engine! *Coupez!*" In the sudden silence which followed Pícaro's snap of the switch, he heard Orsay shouting exultantly in his ear: ". . . and without water or petrol it weighs one hundred and ninety kilos—to a gram!" A few minutes later his partner had taken him aside. "The truck is waiting, *mon vieux*, and Ronsard says that he wishes to talk business now. Leave me to deal with him. Suppose you take the motor back to the shop and wait at the Café des Cochers."

The red-nosed cabby was making ready to leave. He glanced at his saucer, hopefully, as though the price of a beer might have lowered during the day; he laid ten sous on the table, and another for the waiter—a cabby is not the man to forget a tip. Then, with a profound sigh, he heaved himself upright, grasped his whip, settled his tall hat on his head, and shuffled out to the street. Pícaro saw the mournful old horse turn its head at the sound of its master's step. At that moment Orsay pushed open the swinging doors, an expression of weariness on his lean dark face. He dropped into a chair beside his friend. "Quick, François," he called to the little gray-haired waiter. "Monsieur desires another beer, and if I do not have a vermouth within three minutes, I shall collapse!" He turned to Pícaro.

"Ah! that camel of a Ronsard!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "Guess what he had the effrontery to propose!"

"Tell me, Gaby—don't keep me in suspense!"

"Well, he wouldn't listen for an instant to my offer of a half share! 'No, no!' he said; 'you're wasting my time and your own! Ronsard Frères is a closed partnership and our policy is to conduct all our affairs in the same manner. I have looked into your motor, and I believe that certain of your patented features have possibilities, though God knows these radical changes in design often prove unsound! But we will make you a proposition of another sort—an offer of real generosity, young man—an offer I would make to no one but a valued employee like yourself! I have been influenced, I confess, by the thought of your services to us this year—our new touring car will be a success, my brother and I believe. Now listen, and please do not speak until I have finished. This is my last word—there will be nothing to discuss—nothing to argue about. Shares, as I told you, do not interest us, but we are prepared to purchase your motor outright. You and your American friend have laid out certain sums of money in its construction; we will trust you to render a reasonable account of these. Our offer is as follows: we will reimburse you for what you have spent, and beyond that we will pay one hundred thousand

francs for your proprietary rights. Make no mistake, Orsay, we are dealing with you generously!'

"One hundred thousand francs! The price of four motors, according to our estimates! I was pale with rage. 'Is that your last word, Monsieur Ronsard!' I asked as calmly as I could. 'Absolutely,' he replied, turning away to cut the end of a cigar. 'Then we must thank you, and refuse your offer,' I said as I rose. 'I'm sorry that we have wasted your time, but your price is not enough for an affair which may prove serious—which has possibilities, as you admit, yourself.' He stood up, to indicate that our interview was at an end. 'You're like the others, Orsay,' he observed with one of his cold grins; 'like all of the inventing tribe! I shall see you again, never fear. Let me know when you have come to your senses.' "

Orsay raised his glass with an ironical smile. "Down with the capitalists, *hein*?" The American lay back in his chair with folded arms; both men were silent while old François brought a tablecloth and set their small round table for dinner. Pícaro's mind was wandering. Fifty thousand francs. After these pinched months of bread and sausage, and dinners at thirty sous, the sum seemed enormous, inexhaustible! Figures ran through his head. Why, fifty thousand francs would purchase three thousand dinners at the Café de Séville—would enable him to dine with Pfeil each night for seven years! And within seven years he might be rich, or dead! Had Orsay been wise? Now that the motor was finished and a success, Pícaro was beginning to lose interest. He loved mechanical achievement for itself, and when one problem was solved his mind reached out impatiently toward the next. The hardships of poverty are powerless to implant in such a temperament the seeds of a desire for wealth. The sum that Ronsard offered struck Pícaro as enough—it would more than satisfy his daily needs far into a future which did not interest him. But he knew that in such matters he was unpractical—that Orsay's judgment was more to be trusted than his own.

"It's lucky you did the talking, Gaby," he remarked at last. "I would have accepted, I think."

"But you approve, *hein*? You would not have that brigand rob us, as though we were a pair of babes in the wood?"

"No . . . yet, on the other hand, I confess that I would enjoy the spending of fifty thousand francs! We have a saying in America about keeping one's nose to the grindstone, but after nearly two years of that exercise a little change would do no harm."

"You're too easily satisfied. As for me, I don't mind work, but I'm sick of being poor. What is fifty thousand francs? Nothing, my poor Píc—nothing! With it one could buy a limousine like Jules Ronsard's, but how is one to pay for petrol and tires afterward? No, we'd be fools to accept! We have a motor in

advance of the times; if we play our cards, we shall talk of sums greater than thousands, or hundreds of thousands! How much money have you, by the way?"

Pícaro grinned ruefully. "A little less than a hundred francs," he said.

"And I have only fifty! But courage! The first of the month is at hand. To-night I shall run over the list of my acquaintances and see if there is not some one who could be of use to us."

Langhorne glanced at the clock, laid his napkin on the table, and rose from his chair. Orsay's words had inspired him with a sudden idea. "Excuse me, Gaby," he said. "I must hurry home to bathe and dress. I'm going downtown. I'll be back by ten o'clock."

The Maître Pfeil was dining alone, after his custom. The waiter set on his table a dish of mushrooms under glass, and as the lid was lifted the lawyer's bald head darted forward with the gesture of a heron catching sight of a fish, and his nostrils quivered as he sniffed the fragrant steam. Louis sauntered across the room to make sure that his favorite client was well served.

"The mushrooms are exquisite, as usual," observed Pfeil, glancing up at the sleek Louis, standing before him with clasped hands; "but they are growing careless in the cellar. This bottle of Beaune has been permitted to stand on end, and the wine is corked—the merest taint, but a great pity, nevertheless! The supply of this 'ninety-eight is limited, my friend!" He took an empty glass, poured an inch of wine into it, and held it out. Louis tasted a few drops delicately, and gazed at the ceiling for a moment. He nodded his head as he set down the glass.

"Monsieur is right," he declared; "though few of our clients have the palate to notice such things. . . . But here is monsieur's friend, the American gentleman!"

Pícaro pushed open the door, hesitated for a moment, and smiled as he caught the lawyer's eye.

"This is an agreeable surprise!" exclaimed Pfeil in his shrill voice, moving to make room for the newcomer. "I hope you have not dined!"

"Thanks. I had my dinner an hour ago. I want to ask your advice on a matter of business and, not knowing where else to find you, I came here. I'm tied down during the day, in any case."

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Not at all."

"In that case we'll put off our business until I've finished. I don't like to think and eat at once!"

At last Pfeil dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee and lit a cigar. "Now tell me how I can be of service to you," he said. "I hope this delay has not tried

your patience too far!"

"It's nothing so pressing as that!" Pícaro began. "As I said, I'm going to take the liberty of asking your advice. Here is the situation. I'm an engineer, and I have a partner—a Frenchman of my age—the chief designer at Ronsard Frères. In our spare time during the last eighteen months we have designed and built a motor for aircraft. I'll not bother you with technical details; it is enough to say that our motor is of one-hundred-and-eighty horse power, and that we believe it to be both lighter and more reliable than anything in use. Its performance in the tests exceeded our hopes, and the Ronsards have shown signs of interest. But my partner is not willing to accept their offer."

Pfeil waved his cigar emphatically. "Take care!" he interrupted. "Take care! Your partner is right! They are your employers, but I tell you that the fat Jules is a *maître fripon*—a knave—and if he were here I would tell him so to his face! They made you an offer, you say?"

"Yes, to buy our motor outright, leaving us no share—our expenditures reimbursed and a hundred thousand francs in cash."

"That is Jules all over! I begin to suspect that you have invented something of value."

"Well, what I wish to ask you is this: do you know anyone who might be interested in looking at our motor with a view to exploiting it. We would consider an offer to manufacture on a royalty basis, or to give us an interest in the profits. And if such a man could be found, would you consent to act for us in the transaction?"

Pfeil lifted his coffee cup and sipped jerkily before he replied. "Listen, my boy," he said, more slowly than usual. "It is a coincidence—an auspicious one, I hope—that you have come to me at a moment singularly opportune! You have heard of my friend d'Urville, of course? Like Pegoud and your own Wrights, he is known wherever newspapers are read. *Eh bien*—d'Urville has been commissioned by the government to select an engine for the new military biplanes, and I'll tell you a secret. Only a week ago I dined with d'Urville at the Cercle Militaire, and he told me his troubles. It seems that he can find nothing in France. The Germans have a motor which would do, but d'Urville says that our attempts to copy it have not been successful. . . . Here, write your address on this card. D'Urville is still in town. I'll make an appointment with him in the morning, and in the afternoon we'll run out for a look at this motor of yours. You can leave your work a little early, eh?"

Pícaro found his partner reading in bed. "I've racked my brains ever since you left," said Orsay, gloomily, as he laid his book face down on his knees, "and I can think of no one who would be interested. We might take it to America. One thing is sure, I'd rather throw it in the Seine than accept

Ronsard's offer!"

Langhorne grinned as he seated himself on the foot of the bed. "Well, Gaby," he remarked, "we may do better than I thought. I have a friend named Pfeil—a lawyer—and to-morrow afternoon he is going to bring d'Urville out to look at the Langhome-Orsay!" The Frenchman sat up with a start.

"D'Urville!" he exclaimed. "And you know Fernand Pfeil—the Maître Pfeil?"

"Yes."

"And you never told me!" Orsay's eyes were sparkling with excitement. "*Bon Dieu!* you phlegmatic Anglo-Saxons! Do you realize that our fortunes are made!"

Next afternoon, at the appointed time, d'Urville's conspicuous racing car flashed down the avenue and stopped with screaming brakes before the dingy little shop. A gray-haired machinist straightened up from his lathe to glance out through the dirty window.

"It is d'Urville!" he exclaimed to his helper. "And look! The little man with him is Pfeil—the Maître Pfeil! You never heard of him? Sacred name of a duck! Never heard of the man who made the sensational speech at the second trial of Dreyfus? Of the man who was Zola's friend? Tell me, *mon vieux*, in what part of the provinces have you passed your life? On a desert island? In the marshes of the Camargue?"

As he presented Orsay to Pfeil, and shook hands with d'Urville, Pícaro saw that the pilot was even handsomer than the photographs familiar to all the world. He was a man of thirty, tall and athletic in build, with blue eyes, and blond hair brushed back under his English cap. He had the tan of an outdoor life; his features expressed determination, courage, and a bluff good humor. Though he was an aristocrat by birth, d'Urville affected the manner and slang of the streets.

"An American, eh?" he said, heartily. "Me, I like Americans—they are good sports! Well, let's see this *moulin* of yours!"

There was no more work in the shop that night. The proprietor beckoned to his men and a crowd of spectators formed in the corner where the motor stood on its blocks. D'Urville examined the engine, asked its weight, glanced at the record of its performance, and, when its exhaust was filling the little shop with thunder, he took the throttle himself, opening and closing it suddenly to feel the *reprises*. At last he snapped off the switch and turned to Pícaro. "*Ça gaze le tonnere!*" he said, in his curious argot. "*Faut l'essayer en l'air.*" He was laughing at some remark of Orsay's, when Pfeil touched the American's sleeve and made a sign to him to step a little aside.

"He's greatly interested," said the lawyer in a low voice. "Listen—you'll

do nothing for a fortnight, eh? If d'Urville approves, I may have some news for you within that time."

One morning, a week after his visit to Neuilly, Fernand Pfeil sat smoking in his private office. It was a dingy little room on the third floor of an old building near the Bourse. This lawyer, whose apartment in Passy was filled with rare Chinese porcelains and whose estate near Provins was celebrated for the beauty of its gardens, worked in an office with bare walls of discolored plaster, at a desk scratched and stained with ink, in an old chair which creaked when he leaned back or fidgeted with his odd, sudden gestures. The only window was beside the desk, and his visitors were obliged to seat themselves on a heavy oak bench that stood with its back against the opposite wall. At such times, Pfeil swung his chair about to face away from the light, which illuminated the features of the man or woman who chanced to occupy the bench. His hat and stick hung on a peg beside the window, and saving a tall filing case, there was no other furniture in the room.

There were two doors, and both were apt to be locked. Pfeil was more accessible than men of large affairs in England or America, but he did not like to be disturbed without cause or taken by surprise. One door, set with a pane of frosted glass, gave on the outer offices, where half a dozen clerks were busy with their briefs. The other opened on a dark little entry which led to a steep flight of stairs—a sort of charwoman's entrance from the area. This second door was a valuable feature of the place, for it admitted clients who were not anxious to be seen.

Pfeil raised his head with the sudden movement of a fowl. He had heard steps on the back stairs. Next moment there was a knock on the door, and a voice low but perfectly audible: "It is I—Achille." The lawyer sprang up from his chair, the key turned in the lock without a sound.

At Pfeil's gesture of invitation the newcomer seated himself on the bench. He was a man one might have passed fifty times without realizing that one had seen him before; not tall, not short, not stout, not thin; dark-eyed, olive skinned, inconspicuously dressed, and neither old nor young. Such was Achille, who knew more of Pfeil than any man in France. He might have been French, Italian, or Spanish—he spoke all three languages without accent—yet there was about his eyes a suggestion of the Orient, the faintly exotic fullness which betrays the Jew.

"You're ready to make your report?" asked Pfeil, without wasting words.

"Yes."

"Well, go ahead, then. The American first."

"I have nothing but good to say of him," said Achille, taking from his pocket a small notebook closed with a rubber band and kept in a peculiar shorthand of his own. "He rises at half past six, takes coffee in his rooms,

walks to Ronsard Frères, where he works, lunches at the factory, and walks back between five and six to dine at a cheap little place on the Avenue de la Grande Armée. In the evenings and on Sundays he works with his friend at a machine shop outside the Neuilly Gate; they have rented floor space there, and have spent many months in building a motor of their own design—something for aircraft, I was told. Mr. Langhorne and his friend have an old housekeeper to look after them—a worthy woman said to adore the pair. No other woman has been inside the apartment since the American came. He has no mistress, and, though one is skeptical in these matters, the people of the quarter declare that he leads the life of another Saint Anthony."

The lawyer smiled and nodded jerkily. "You do not know the Anglo-Saxons," he observed; "they are not like us. It is a fact that among them there are men of this kind—not many, but they exist! Now as to debts."

"He has none, so far as I can discover. Both men pay as they go."

Pfeil permitted himself a little sigh of relief and passed his hand over his bald head. "I will confess to you," he remarked, "that your words give me pleasure. I've taken a liking to this young man, and mistakes humiliate me. We've dined together at times, and once, in the beginning of our acquaintance, I offered to pay for his dinner. 'You'll pardon me,' he said, 'but since I cannot afford to ask you to dine with me, I think it would be pleasanter if each of us paid for his own meal.' He possesses delicacy, my good Achille! But the Frenchman—what of him?"

His familiar turned the leaves of the notebook. "He is an engineer," said Achille, "a graduate of the school at Châlons. Seven years ago he got a place as machinist's helper with the Ronsards, and now he draws a considerable salary as their chief of design. A man with a future, it is said. His reputation is excellent and his habits nearly as exemplary as those of his friend. Some time ago he got rid of his mistress, whom he maintained in an apartment on the Rue La Tour. Her name is Annette Corlay."

Pfeil looked up with one of his darting glances. "A little Bretonne," he asked, "who neither paints nor dyes her hair, and who possesses a pair of very handsome arms?"

"Precisely."

"I know her. She was a mannequin at the Maison Cassiot; now she is with a Captain Langlois of the Chasseurs—the son of my friend the Maître Langlois."

"You know everything, Monsieur Pfeil!" Achille shook his head as he snapped the rubber band on his notebook and put it back in his pocket. "I declare that at times you make me feel an incumbrance—a fifth wheel!"

"*Allons*, my friend," said the omniscient one, not at all displeased; "it is not as bad as that! No, you exaggerate; it was pure chance that I knew this pretty

Annette."

That evening, when Pícaro returned from his work, he found at the apartment a note addressed to him in a strange hand. It was from Pfeil.

"Bring your friend to dinner with me at eight," he read. "When we have dined we shall talk over our little affair. Come with good appetites, for one of my friends has sent me a present of snipe from the Sologne, and Louis pronounces them the finest he has seen this year!"

He handed the note to Orsay, who was on his way to the bathroom in slippers and a dressing gown. "I knew it!" exclaimed the Frenchman, his lean, dark face illuminated by a smile. "What luck! This means that our fortunes are made, without a doubt!"

They found Pfeil already at his table, which was set for three. "Not a word of business till we have had our coffee!" he said as they seated themselves. "Come, we shall begin with a glass of sherry and some of my favorite bisque; Louis has found one or two old bottles to go with our birds. Have you heard of the scandal at the Ministry of Marine? An extraordinary affair! That Spanish woman is a type such as one meets in fiction. . . ."

At last the lawyer pushed back his coffee cup and lit a cigar. He glanced about the restaurant—nearly empty at this hour—and drew from his pocket a gold-mounted pencil and a memorandum book bound in red leather.

"Now to work!" he began. "D'Urville was favorably impressed with your motor, and I have taken the liberty of looking into your patents, on which I congratulate you. But first of all I must ask if you have made estimates of costs? By that I mean the costs of working on a small scale."

Pícaro glanced at his partner.

"You will understand," said Orsay, thus called upon to speak, "that figures of this kind cannot be exact. Nevertheless, our estimates will serve in a general way. With proper equipment, if we received an order for a dozen motors, I believe that our costs would not exceed fifteen thousand francs each. In quantity, they might be manufactured for twelve thousand."

"And your selling price?"

"The German motor, our only competitor, sells for nineteen thousand marks."

"Good! Now listen. I have talked this over with d'Urville, and he wants us to build three or four engines at once—for the military trials. If the performance is good, he promises me that we shall receive orders immediately—not large orders, of course, but enough to keep us going. My friends, there is war in the air! It may not come this year or the next, but it is coming, in spite of the economists who tell us that another European war is impossible! I smell it, and in these matters we Jews possess an infallible scent!" Pfeil's black eyes glittered. He leaned forward with both elbows on the table, the cigar in his

fingers sending up a thin wreath of smoke.

"Yes, war!" he went on. "A war more terrible than any the world has known! War on the land, on the sea, in the air! France must be ready when that day comes, and this motor of ours may perhaps have its small part to play."

He glanced down at his memorandum book, open on the table. "I have sketched out a little proposition. See what you think of it. First, I will give you one hundred and fifty thousand francs for a half interest. Of this I expect you to keep fifty thousand for yourselves, and to bank the rest to the credit of the 'Société Anonyme des Moteurs Langhorne-Orsay.' A high-sounding title, eh! That will be the name of our little company. Second, I will add another hundred thousand to yours—that should give us sufficient capital for a start, *hein*? Third, you will agree to resign your positions with the Ronsards and to set to work at once. We shall need a small shop with electric power, a certain amount of machinery, and the materials to build the motors d'Urville wants. Our work will require all of your time. You may draw on the company for whatever salaries you think fair. One thing I insist on: your task will be to manufacture the motors—to make them as well and as economically as possible; my province will be to dispose of them and to direct all matters of policy. There—I have finished. Think it over, messieurs. Take a day or two, if you wish; there is no hurry. I am asking you to give up your careers with the Ronsard Brothers, but if you have faith in your invention, I believe that my offer is a fair one."

The partners exchanged glances. Both were smiling, and Orsay's head moved in an almost imperceptible nod. "There is no need of thinking it over, Monsieur Pfeil," said Pícaro. "Your offer is generous in the extreme, and as for me, I accept at once. What do you say, Gaby?"

"I ask nothing better," declared Orsay. "I believe that Monsieur Pfeil is our good fairy in disguise!"

The lawyer smiled; he liked these two young men. "You are men of decision," he said as he rose abruptly from his seat to shake their hands in turn. "It is settled, then! Can you come to my office to-morrow afternoon?"

Emil, the hollow-cheeked waiter at the Café des Cyclistes, where Orsay had dined in former days of prosperity, was astounded when the two friends—with Antoinette in tow—burst through the door half an hour before closing time. The place was deserted, and as he rose from the seat where he had been dozing Orsay gave him a friendly thump between the shoulder-blades.

"A bottle of thy best champagne, old friend!" he exclaimed. "And a glass for thyself! This is a day to be remembered!"

"Ah, Monsieur Langhorne," said the old woman while Emil was opening a second bottle of wine, "I had nearly forgotten! This came during the morning

and I forgot to put it in the tray. I had it in my hand to give you when you rushed in and ordered me to put on my hat and coat."

Antoinette was holding out an American letter addressed in Rita's hand. The envelope seemed strangely light and thin.

"You'll pardon me," said Pícaro to Orsay as he tore it open and drew out a single folded sheet.

> Blaise has asked me to marry him [the note began]. I'm very happy, but I'm worried over him. He's away just now. I'm afraid he and the major have had a quarrel. I'll write again when he comes back. I haven't told your father, so don't mention this when you write home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Rita du Quesne wrote to Pícaro, she did not realize the seriousness of the quarrel between the major and Blaise. It was no sudden affair of hot words over a trifle. Months of tension had led up to the outbreak. The last scene was staged on the evening of a winter day.

The major was going shooting that morning. Long before daylight Julius came shuffling along the gallery, a lantern in his hand. There was a biting chill in the air and the old man shivered and muttered to himself as he lit the lamp in the study and touched a match to the kindling in the fireplace. When the logs were crackling he stood for a moment warming his hands before he passed through the dressing room and scratched softly at the major's door.

"Time you was up, Major," he whispered, hoarsely. "Yes, sir—quarter to five and the fire's a-goin'."

His master slept with the lightness of old age.

"All right, Julius. Much obliged. You can bring the coffee now."

A match was scratched; the yellow lamplight shone out through the windows of Doña Margarita's room. Presently Major Langhorne came into the study and stood with his back to the fireplace, warming his hands. A woolen muffler knitted by his wife hung from his neck; he was dressed in hip boots and a shooting coat of heavy corduroy. Julius opened the door and shuffled into the room, carrying with painful care a tray set with the major's breakfast things. While old Langhorne drank his coffee and ate his bit of toast he heard the faint crunch of wheels on the gravel outside. Young Julius was waiting with the spring wagon to drive him to the marsh.

The negro was speaking in low tones to his son, the small black boy who shivered beside him on the seat. "How many birds your mammy put in that sack?" he asked.

"A dozen. I counted 'em."

"When Domingo git 'em?"

"Las' night. They's nice and fresh."

"You be careful to-day, boy! Keep on the far side of that gum tree and don't make no fool mistakes! Git going now. The major won't be ready for a while, and I'll drive slow."

Little Julius slid over the wheel, shouldered a bag his father handed him, and trudged off to disappear in the dark.

When Major Langhorne took his gun and cartridge case from Julius, and Young Julius touched the fat trotting horses with the whip, a new day was dawning in a cloudless sky. The air was sharp and clean to the nostrils; a cock

crowed in the great liveoak behind the house; the cattle were moving in the frosty bottom land. It was still dark in the valley, but the sky line of the San Benito Hills was etched in sepia against the faint rose which heralded the day. The old horses—his gift to Doña Margarita in an era when motor cars were still unknown—moved at a steady jogging trot; the wheels of the spring wagon sank noiselessly into the dust of the road; the flaws of air wandering inland from the beaches brought with them the booming rumble of the surf.

They crossed the state road and drove a quarter of a mile across the marsh, to a clump of tall gum trees growing on a knoll which rose like an island in a sea of sedge. There was a spring of sweet fresh water on the south side—a spring that seeped up slowly in the midst of a patch of rushes and spread out below to form a pond filled with the grasses wildfowl love. This was the major's favorite stand—in the outer fringe of rushes, in a deep double box sunk in the mud and fitted with seats and racks for extra shells. The place was haunted by memories of Pícaro; it was here at his father's side, with the new sixteen-gauge gun of his twelfth birthday, that the boy had shot his first wild duck.

The marsh was turning gray as they waded out through the dead reeds; the eastern sky was luminous and streaked with rose and gold. A few duck—vague, swiftly disappearing wraiths—bounded aloft, quacking, and sped seaward on singing wings. A snipe rose in swift, twisting flight, sounding a guttural call of alarm; somewhere on the marsh a teal was whistling his monotonous note. The major stepped down cautiously into his box, reached up for gun and shells, and moved to make room for his follower. "Mighty few birds in," he remarked. "Not much of a day, I'm afraid."

The powerful man beside him turned a face that was a blot of darkness in the vague gray light. "Yes sir, Major," he said, "seems like they ain't many birds about. Maybe they'll come in when they starts to shootin' down San Ygnacio way." But he knew that the duck might have been there in hundreds half an hour before.

Major Langhorne loaded his gun.

Presently the air was filled with the soft rushing sound of wings. A score of pin-tail were sweeping down in a great spiral to alight. Julius crouched in tense excitement.

"Here they comes, Major!" he whispered. "You ready, sir? Now! Now!"

The splendid birds, clearly visible in the increasing light, had turned for the last time and were sailing in on curved rigid wings, feet drooping and graceful necks outstretched. The major rose to his feet, peering anxiously through the spectacles Rita had persuaded him to wear. His eyes were dim, but the music of wings was in his ears and he thought he perceived the vague forms of wildfowl in the air. "Still a little dark to shoot," he muttered as the gun came to

his shoulder. The fowl bunched for an instant, and scattered to tower wildly at the double report of the gun.

At the base of the knoll, sixty yards away, a tall old gum tree grew close to the water. Julius glanced that way as he sprang to his feet. “Fine, sir!” he exclaimed, and an instant later the sound of two heavy splashes came to their ears. “A double! I know’d you hit ’em—saw the feathers fly and one old drake went up in the air like they does when they’s shot through the head!”

“Just luck, Julius,” said Langhorne, smiling to himself as he shielded a match to light one of his slender cigars, “pure luck! My eyes are no good any more. I wish Mr. Henry were here—he’d enjoy this, eh? What’s that you say? Another flock coming in over the dunes?”

The sun rose, the air grew warm, the dead reeds shivered and rustled as the wind made up in little gusts. The birds flew well, and flock after flock came speeding in from the sea, circled the Balsa, and scaled down to alight. Sometimes the major missed, as all men will; sometimes the reports of his gun were followed by splashes from the direction of the old gum tree; once he got both barrels into the thick of a bunched cloud of teal, and five birds came thumping down about the blind. Finally, when the flight began to slacken, he turned to Julius. “How many down—seventeen? That’s enough for this morning. You can pick up now. Put the birds in the wagon and call me when you’re ready to go.” He sat in the box while the negro waded about the far end of the pond; these mornings on the marsh had become the happiest hours left to the old man. He dreaded the inevitable day when his dimming eyesight would no longer permit him to shoot. He smiled to himself—he was still able to bring home birds enough for one of his duck dinners. He would invite Bob Tisdale and two or three friends from San Ygnacio. . . .

Concha, the fat housekeeper, was in a bad humor that morning. Old Julius had gone back to bed after the major’s departure, and, knowing that he had been up before daylight, she had left some breakfast for him, on the back of the stove, where it would keep warm. It was ten o’clock and she had knocked three times at his door without response. “Very well, then,” she called out angrily in Spanish the last time, when the same disdainful silence answered her knock; “your breakfast goes to the pigs! Lazy old man! Is this the way you reward my kindness? Me—who toil for you every day!” Her old white cat had followed her; as she turned away, she aimed a spiteful kick at him.

Now she was feeding her chickens by the kitchen door. “*Pita! Pita! Pita!*” she called—a shrill, long-drawn cry. At the sound of her voice the fowls foraging under the liveoaks raised their heads inquiringly. “*Pita! Pita! Pita!*” Concha’s pet Minorca cock led the rush, running with outstretched wings. He was privileged to eat out of the dishpan from which she scattered food for the

others, but to-day she cuffed him roughly aside. Her face, usually so good natured, was set in lines as grim as its folds of fat permitted. As she sat there on the bottommost step, she heard Rita du Quesne's voice from the kitchen door.

"Good morning, Concha. I'm going to town with Mr. Blaise. We won't be here to lunch."

The fat woman turned her head and attempted a smile. How pretty Miss Rita was, in her furs and dark tailored suit! "Wrap up well, *Nena*," she said; "it will be cold coming home to-night!" The girl nodded, with a smile in her clear brown eyes, and as she turned away the housekeeper muttered under her breath, "Ah, my little one—if you knew what old Concha knows!" She crossed herself.

She raised her head to listen. A horseman was approaching at a canter. That would be Domingo. Next moment her husband drew rein by the corner of the house and called to her. "Hola! Conchita! Bring me a dipper of water!" The gaunt old man sat his horse easily and gracefully—on horseback, no one would have suspected that he was a cripple. He rolled a cigarette while his wife filled a dipper from the *olla* hanging by the door.

"Leave thy horse here, my Domingo," she said when he had dashed the remaining drops to the ground, "and come inside. I have something to say to thee." He nodded, dismounted carefully, flung the reins over his horse's head, and limped into the house. Concha waddled heavily after him, to sink down on a bench among Doña Margarita's roses, while Domingo stood before her—one toe to the gravel and his weight resting on his sound leg.

The woman glanced right and left before she spoke. "Juan Montez came here to see me this morning!" she said. Domingo's cheeks grew hollower as he drew in the smoke of his cigarette. He tossed it away and exhaled blue wisps that eddied from his nostrils.

"Well?" he asked, quickly.

"He has had news of his father's death, and the governor has sent word that he may return without fear. He is heir to great lands below Rosario and he loves Lupita. I have known it since a year ago. Now he desires to marry her; he came to ask thy permission and my blessing. In a month he will cross the border into Mexico, and when he goes he wishes to take our daughter with him."

Her husband's brown wrinkled face betrayed no emotion. "Juan is a good man," he said, calmly; "there is no better *vaquero* in the ranch. If he can provide for our daughter, let him take her. I shall not be sorry to see her married. She needs a strong man's rule."

Concha glanced at him keenly. "Ay," she exclaimed in a low voice, "she does, in truth! Come, sit here beside me; I must tell thee a thing I learned only

last night."

Domingo took three painful steps and seated himself beside his wife. His face grew stern as she leaned toward him and whispered rapidly into his ear. Suddenly his back stiffened and he turned to face her.

"You are sure of this?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Only too sure, alas! Last night, when you were asleep, she came to my room in tears and told me everything. She is afraid. He is reckless, and if Montez learns of this, blood will be shed!"

"*Por Dios!*" His deep voice rang out in the oath. "If it were any other man!"

Concha's fat body quivered with agitation. "What are we to do, my Domingo?" she whispered. "*Dios mio!* What a situation! Juan will be like a tiger if he learns!" Her husband had taken out his tobacco pouch, and was rolling another cigarette with hands that trembled a little.

"Leave this to me," he said as he rose slowly from the bench. "It must be settled to-day. All you need do is to make sure that Lupita does not see either man."

Major Langhorne lunched alone that day. He was pleasantly tired by his shooting, and when his cigar was lit he lay down in the hammock on the gallery with a steamer rug over his knees and a recent letter from Pícaro.

At times he had felt little qualms of conscience over his elder son, but of late his mind had been more at ease. What a fine fellow Píc was! Nearly two years had passed since he had left home, and though the father would have been glad to help at any time, he felt a secret pride in the fact that never once had Pícaro asked for money. There had been hard times, no doubt—but that tempered a man if he had the right stuff in him. Now he must be nearly out of the woods. He seemed to have found a friend worth while in this young Orsay of whom his letters were full. And the eccentric Jew, Pfeil. . . . The major did not like Jews, but he trusted Pícaro's judgment of men. Yes, Píc would take care of himself. Success was bound to come to a man of that sort. If only Blaise would settle down. . . .

The major dropped Pícaro's letter and sank into a revery. For months he had felt that he was drifting apart from Blaise—the younger son to whom he had transferred the affection once lavished on his wife. He had never approved of the boy's gay San Francisco friends, but why should he have dropped them all at once to frequent the bar rooms of San Ygnacio? Interest in the ranch? It was true that he spent all his days in the saddle, that he worked with the cattle and at the new farming harder than he had ever worked before—but the father was unconvinced. That chit of a girl—no, that was impossible! Had he spoken too harshly on that day many months ago, when he had warned the boy that,

unless he was more discreet, men would soon couple his name with that of the foreman's daughter? Blaise had been sullen—he was almost too proud and sensitive for a workaday world—but he seemed to have taken his father's advice; since then the major had seen nothing of which he could complain. He sighed. If only the lad would settle down—would marry Rita, for example.

"*Patrón!*"

The word, pronounced respectfully in Domingo's deep voice, penetrated the old man's anxious thoughts. He glanced up and saw that the foreman was standing on the gallery, five yards off, his wide hat in his hands.

"Yes, Domingo," said old Langhorne in his kindly way. "What is it? I'm resting. The shooting was good this morning. Take that chair and a cigar; there is the box."

"*Muchas gracias!*" The foreman shook his head. "Juan Montez," he went on, "is leaving next month."

"A good man with the cattle. You'll miss him. Why is he leaving?"

"He has fallen heir to his father's lands. There was a price on his head, but now he has word that he may return in peace."

"Give him a good horse when he leaves. He has been useful here."

"*Sí*, señor . . . and he has asked for the hand of my daughter Lupita."

"Does she want to marry him?"

"*Patrón*, my daughter wants what I want!" Domingo spoke a little grimly.

"And you?"

"I have given my consent."

The major smiled. "We'll give them an old-fashioned wedding, then—eh, Domingo?"

But there was no smile on the foreman's lips. He stood with eyes cast down, his crippled leg bent, and his hat revolving slowly in his hands. Finally he raised his head and gazed straight into Major Langhorne's eyes.

"They will not be married for a month," he said. "Much may happen in four weeks, *Patrón!*"

"What do you mean? You speak in riddles!"

"This—if I may make so bold: the *patrón* would be wise to persuade Don Blas to spend this month away from home."

The major sat up impatiently. "Still riddles. Out with it, man! What's on your mind?"

Domingo was silent for a moment. His fingers twisting nervously the wide brim of his hat betrayed his agitation. "Ay, I must tell you," he said at last in a low voice. "Señor . . . my daughter . . . your son!"

The major stared at the old man who had served him faithfully for more than thirty years. "You don't mean . . ."

"Yes!" Domingo interrupted his master for once.

Langhorne's face grew stern as he realized the significance of this monosyllable, wrung from a father's breast. He rose quickly from the hammock, tossed away his cigar, and laid a hand on the shoulder of his old dependent.

"Domingo! Are you sure of this?" The foreman nodded gloomily.

"She has confessed to her mother. But let that be. *Patrón*, Montez is a man like you or me! He knows nothing of this, nor do the others. I ask it of you for your sake and my own—can you not send Don Blas away?"

Blaise and Rita were on their way home from the city. It was late afternoon and a cold wind blew in gusts from the north. The roads were deserted; the little car sped southward at an effortless forty miles an hour. Without turning his head, Blaise glanced at the girl beside him, silent and muffled in furs. Her brown eyes were sparkling and her cheeks delicately flushed; her silence was the silence of happiness, for she was alone with Blaise—close beside the man she loved.

Blaise glanced at her again. A beautiful girl. The man who got her would be lucky! Bob Tisdale was rather keen, he thought. A damned prig, Bob, but a steady-going fellow with an assured position in society. What a lovely profile—firm, delicate, high-bred. And her hair—it was richer and softer than the fur about her neck! Suddenly, for the first time, Blaise felt a little thrill at Rita's nearness. Why not? It was time he married. . . . They were only distantly related—third or fourth cousins. The old man would be pleased, he knew; and as for the girl, he suspected that she would ask nothing better. Blaise had never found women difficult. Why hadn't Píc married her? That would have been the natural thing. And she was good as she was pretty—the kind of a woman a man needed for a wife. Not so amusing as the Ferguson girls in San Francisco, but she had ten times their brains. It would be hell to be tied up to a feather-headed little flirt like Molly Ferguson! Blaise sighed as he turned into the long road between the foothills and the dunes. He swung out automatically to pass a car loaded with tourists, and opened the throttle till the needle wavered about the figure 50 on the dial.

Why not, after all? The business of Lupita was growing damnably complex; he hated the scheming, the deception, the atmosphere of intrigue the attachment had forced on him. It would not be easy to give up Lupita . . . something in his nature responded to her primitive appeal. God! He would never forget some of the hours they had passed together! That child of seventeen had met him more than halfway—had known how to arouse in him emotions no other woman had inspired. But the old aunt in San Ygnacio was becoming greedier every day; last week she had not been satisfied, and she had let fall one or two ugly hints. . . . No, things couldn't go on as they were. Why

not marry her off to Montez and be done with it? That would leave the way clear. He pondered for a moment over this idea, and, though it was distasteful, it seemed the best way out. Then, in an instant, with characteristic decision, he made up his mind.

Blaise felt a glow of virtue—almost of righteousness. He was fond of his father, in his own curious way, and he knew that he could make the old man happy by turning respectable, by marrying, by ceasing his visits to San Ygnacio. After all, it would be simple. He would get rid of his mistress, whose marriage with Juan Montez would shut the old woman's mouth, and he would marry the charming girl beside him in the car. He stole another glance at her. Odd that he had never really appreciated Rita until to-day! She was exquisite. What luck that Píc or some other man had not forestalled him! He remembered his faint sense of satisfaction a few hours before, when he had taken her to lunch at a hotel . . . how the heads had turned as they were walking to their table; how he had overheard a woman murmur to her gray-haired friend whose lorgnette was frankly up: "Yes, Margaret du Quesne—old Major Langhorne's ward. Lovely, isn't she?" All at once the girl beside him seemed very desirable; he began to feel the stimulation, the provocative thrill of the pursuit. Another man would have been content to approach gradually, waiting his opportunity, but Blaise's method was not one that wasted time. The speed of the car slackened.

"Rita," he said in his soft voice, "I've been wanting to have a little talk with you."

Her head turned and she smiled at him with limpid brown eyes. "Yes, Blaise. What is it?"

"I'm worried about father. He's growing old and he and I don't seem to understand each other nowadays."

"What is the trouble?"

"It's my fault. I'm not much good, but from now on I'm going to try to please him. I think the old gentleman is the finest man I ever knew, and I hate to feel that we are drifting apart. But I believe he cares for me—and you do, too, don't you?"

"Indeed I do! Oh, Blaise—please try! He's worried because you've dropped all your friends." She hesitated, and then went on bravely: "And yes—I'd better tell you—he doesn't understand your visits to San Ygnacio. Remember that he has old-fashioned ideas." Her eyes told him what her lips did not betray. Blaise winced a little as he turned away and gazed at the road ahead.

"Dear old Rita," he said, softly, "you and father. . . . I'm a lucky man to have you two! I don't know what's been the matter with me since Píc left. I've been drifting; I think I might have gone on the rocks if I hadn't had you!" As a

man of some experience, he was skilled in the use of the pronoun which may be either plural or singular. He laid his hand on hers, and, though it was withdrawn gently and at once, it was not withdrawn before he felt the trembling of her arm.

Rita's heart was beating so that she dared not trust herself to speak. Was it possible that Blaise had cared for her all this time—that he was about to declare his love? It was almost the first time that he had addressed her save in the most casual way. If only her heart would stop beating, she would lead the talk into channels less personal. . . . For some reason—feminine and obscure—she did not want him to speak of love to-day, yet in her new happiness she trembled at the thought that to-morrow the old casual relations might be resumed.

The major was standing on the gallery when they arrived. He managed to smile at Rita, but when she had gone into the house he turned sternly to his son.

"Blaise," he said, harshly, "come into my study for a moment."

At the door, the major stood aside, signifying by a stiff little bow that his son was to precede him. Then he walked to the fireplace, where a great log of oak glowed on the andirons, turned his back to the fire, and stood regarding Blaise for a moment before he spoke.

The old man found it hard to speak, now that the time had come. How handsome the boy was, standing there with his cap in his hand and a polo coat over his arm. He had his mother's dark, fearless eyes—the same proud carriage of the head. All at once he felt his anger melting away, felt a wave of affection for this lad who was all that remained to him of Doña Margarita. After all, Blaise had done no more than a thousand other hot-blooded boys. . . . The major thought of certain escapades of his own, fifty years before.

"My boy," he said, and this time his voice was not so harsh, "I've wired Bates and Macdonald to expect you in New Mexico. You had better leave in the morning. Take your time when you get there; travel about and see what they have to offer. We need a dozen head of young bulls—the best you can pick up. They breed good Herefords in that part of the country. You'll want at least a month for the trip."

Blaise looked at his father in some astonishment. He knew that there was no hurry about the bulls, and it did not suit his plans to be away at this time.

"Why are you in such a hurry, sir?" he asked.

The question irritated the major, eager to have this interview done with, to have Blaise safely off the ranch.

"Never mind that!" exclaimed the old man, usually the most lenient of fathers. "I want you to go. You can pack up to-night, and catch the early train."

Blaise was becoming irritated, in his turn, but his manner remained courteous. “Give me a week,” he said; “I’ve one or two things I ought to do before I leave. I missed Bob in the city to-day; I’ll have to leave him my proxy for the meeting of the Creciente Petroleum.” But he was thinking of a cottage set back from the road on the outskirts of San Ygnacio, of a cottage where another meeting was to take place—an interview to which he looked forward with feelings of mingled pleasure and dread.

“Well, take a day in the city,” the major was saying. “Stop over a couple of days, if you like, but get off to-morrow morning and go on to New Mexico when your business is done.”

Blaise felt his irritation increasing. What could the old gentleman have in mind? “Tell me, father,” he asked, quietly, with a puzzled look in his handsome eyes, “what is the matter? Why are you so anxious to be rid of me?”

Major Langhorne rarely permitted himself an oath, but now he swore. “Damn it, Blaise!” he exclaimed. “Do you want me to tell you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then . . . because you’ve been making a fool of yourself with Domingo’s girl! Because I want her to marry Montez and clear off the place! Because I want you out of the way until they leave!”

The smile on his son’s lips did nothing to soothe the old man’s temper. “Fool is a hard word, sir! Perhaps I deserve it, but, after all, this little affair is not so serious as all that!”

With his hands still folded behind his back, old Langhorne crossed the room to where his son stood. His face was white with one of those sudden rages which boil up against those we love. Gazing him straight in the eyes, he asked in a low voice a question he would not have asked in cold blood.

“Blaise, are you Lupita’s lover?”

Lying was not among young Langhorne’s faults.

“Yes, sir,” he said, quietly, blaming himself next moment for not having shielded the girl.

The major’s eyes narrowed. “And this little affair,” he burst out, “doesn’t seem very serious to you! It’s a desecration to mention her name at such a time, but, by God! sir, I’m glad your mother is dead and cannot hear you speak! Domingo—for thirty years our loyal friend—my son rewards him with dishonor in his old age! Now go—and don’t come back until your work is done!”

As his father spoke, the dusky flush in Blaise’s cheeks faded to pallor. He stood with his head held high. “Do you realize,” he asked, in the same soft, courteous voice, “what you’ve just said to me? Now I’m going. Good-by, sir.”

Blaise did not appear at dinner that evening, and the major, in spite of his

efforts to do both, could neither eat nor speak. When the difficult meal was over, Rita knocked at the door of Blaise's room. She found him in the midst of a confusion of clothes and papers, strapping a small trunk.

"What are you doing?" she asked, in anxious astonishment. "Are you going away?"

"Yes," he said, grimly, "and I'm afraid I'll be gone a long time, unless father apologizes for something he said to me to-night!"

"Oh, Blaise! What's the trouble? Surely there must be some mistake."

"There's no mistake. . . . He ordered me out of the house. Listen, Rita, I'm sorry to have to speak so abruptly, but I'm leaving to-night. I love you—I nearly told you this afternoon. Come away with me. We'll run straight through to San Francisco and be married there. Come. I need you. I can't bear to go alone!"

"But Blaise. . . ."

There were tears in the girl's eyes. He held out his arms and she came to him blindly.

"You must come, Rita dear," he was saying, while one hand stroked her soft brown hair. "You can be ready in an hour or two, can't you? I have plenty in the bank, and later on I can easily find something to do. Come. We'll take the little car, put it aboard the steamer, and go to the islands for our honeymoon!"

But Rita was gently disengaging herself from his arms. She drew away from him and shook her head. "I love you very dearly," she said in a low voice; "but can't you see that it's impossible? Who is to look after your father? Think of him! Oh, Blaise, go to him now, tell him you're sorry for whatever you have done, ask him to forgive you. He loves you more than anyone in the world!" Her eyes pleaded with him, but her heart sank as she perceived the firm set of his lips, the hardness of his chin.

"No, Rita. You don't understand. When he has asked my pardon, I'll ask his; not before. No, I must leave to-night. Come with me, dear. . . ."

But the girl shook her head sadly as he came to her and took her in his arms.

CHAPTER NINE

The military trials came in the early spring, followed by Pfeil's dinner, when d'Urville rose, a little unsteady with wine, to toast the future of the Langhorne-Orsay. Those were the days of the shooting in the offices of the *Figaro*, of the riots at Calmette's funeral.

The army's order for motors marked the beginning of Pícaro's career as a manufacturer, of the start of a period of work so absorbing that even the undertone of sadness in Rita's letters touched no more than the surface of his mind. Each day the work of planning, of organization, of management, took stronger hold on his imagination; success was effecting in him a change poverty had been powerless to bring about.

In June came the Caillaux trial, and then the assassination of the Austrian archduke—the little cloud in the East so few Parisians of those days had eyes to see; the cloud that drifted westward, spreading and darkening till Europe lay in shadow. "This smells of war!" remarked a thousand business men to their neighbors in the Metro, and the others would raise their eyes from the morning paper to respond indifferently: "You think so? . . . Do you suppose it's true that Madame Caillaux had been practicing with a revolver?" Orsay developed Royalist leanings and, being a Parisian, he shouted on the boulevards, "*Caillaux assassin!*" and as an afterthought, "*À Berlin!*" while the gangs of the opposition screamed truculently: "*Vive Caillaux! À bas la guerre!*" The trial—what revelations of social and political decay! The people of the city, thought Pícaro, were like a flock of vultures croaking and quarreling about a putrescent carcass—heedless of an approaching hurricane. Then the President returned from Russia and drove to the Elysée with Joffre while the crowds cheered, Jaurès was murdered as he dined, the mobilization orders were posted; and the watchword, "*Hauts les Cœurs et Vive la France!*" marked the birth of the Union Sacrée. On the day when the orders appeared, Pfeil drove out to the modest new shop in Neuilly and called the partners aside.

"The government declares," he said, "that war is by no means sure. France is arming herself only as a safeguard against aggression. But I tell you that war is inevitable and that this war will not be over in a day! Both of you will wish to serve France. Remember one thing—you'll serve her best by staying where you are! Don't lose your heads, my friends! Your duty is here, as you will soon perceive."

Pícaro felt the change that was taking place in the life of the city. He had believed the French an effervescent race, and was prepared for oratory, for scenes of enthusiasm, for patriotic ardor raised to frenzy by fierce music and

the tramp of feet. Instead of this, he saw the new Paris of that autumn—serious, exalted, filled with an inflexible resolution. Familiar faces were disappearing from the cafés. At the Cyclistes, Orsay's cadaverous waiter had joined the colors as a volunteer; the sleek Louis had left the Séville to shoulder a rifle and a pack; one evening Antoinette gave the partners a message from the Café des Cochers—the proprietor would be honored if they would come that night to a little fête he was giving as a farewell to his brother-in-law, the gray-haired waiter leaving to join his regiment of territorials. Antoinette was losing her interest in the talk of the quarter; three of her sons were in colonial battalions believed to be on their way to the front. The hard-faced young taxi-drivers were no longer to be seen of an afternoon, sipping their beer and talking communism in the Cochers; taxis grew scarce, and their drivers were apt to be superannuated cabmen, who cursed over punctures and fretted at the handling of these motors which needed oil instead of oats. But the work of the L-O factory went on smoothly after the early disastrous weeks—a word from Pfeil procured exemption for those of the men who were willing to serve their country in the rear. That was how the lawyer put it, at least, in a fervent little speech he made the assembled hands one Saturday night. Pícaro read of the disasters of Charleroi and Mons, knew early in September that the government had gone south to Bordeaux, and listened through long warm nights to the mutter of cannon on the Marne. The Germans wavered, halted, turned—and turned again to face their pursuers on the lines that were to mark the greatest siege the world had known.

One afternoon in December, Pfeil sat alone in his private office. The sky was overcast with dull, gray snow clouds and the light in the shabby room was dim. The lawyer was rising from his chair to snap on the electricity when Pícaro knocked at the door and ushered Orsay in. Pfeil's black eyes glittered at sight of them; he shook their hands warmly and motioned them toward the bench.

"You got my note, eh?" he asked. "Well, I have news for you! Our motor is making a name for itself! What would you say to orders from the English and Russian governments? *Eh bien*, they are ready to place orders if you can guarantee deliveries! How long would it take to double our capacity? This is for you to decide. You may count on me for whatever funds we need. . . ." They talked for an hour, planning, estimating, laying out a rough schedule of production for the ensuing months.

"Since we must refuse the Russian order," Pfeil was saying, "it might be filled in another way. Listen. You'll be amused. Jules Ronsard came here yesterday; his keen nose had gotten wind of these rubles waiting to be picked up. I fancy he lacked the effrontery to go to you direct. Guess what he

proposed. ‘You’ve dropped on a good thing,’ he remarked, with one of his chilly grins. ‘We’d have had it ourselves if we’d realized that these young men had other friends! But, come, I’ve a proposition to make you. The Russians want a hundred of your motors, eh?’ (Sacred Jules! I’d give something to learn how he came to know of this affair!) ‘Your capacity’s limited; you’ll be forced to refuse this order amounting to more than two million francs. It would be a pity to let those rubles escape to England or to the United States. Why not compromise and pocket a share of them, at least? The price of your motor is twenty-two thousand francs. Why not give me a license to manufacture it, turn over this Russian order to me, and accept a royalty of three thousand on each motor I build?’ ” The Alsatian glanced at his partners with an ironical smile. “Well, why not?” he asked, after a short pause.

Orsay swore under his breath. “Ah, the camel!” he muttered. “I suppose we must deal with him, but it hurts me to think of our patents earning him one sou!”

That night when he returned to the apartment Pícaro’s mind was so taken up with business that he glanced twice at the tray before he saw the letter from Rita, lying there face up. He had not written her for more than a month.

A year had passed since Blaise’s departure from the ranch, but the major had never mentioned the trouble to his other son, and Rita had been equally reticent. Now, at last, the girl’s long silence was broken.

> You’ll be sorry [her letter began] to learn that old Julius is dead. He had some sort of a stroke two days ago; we sent for Bob at once, but the old man was unconscious and died within a few hours. We buried him yesterday. What an old dear he was! The tears come into my eyes every time I pass his empty bench or walk around the south side of the house where he used to like to sit in the sun. Will you ever forget the day we persuaded him to go sailing, or the time you gave him the April-fool cigar? Dear me, Píc, I’m growing old, beginning to live in the past!
>
> Julius’s death has been a good deal of a shock to the major. Concha goes about like a ghost since Julius died; they never seemed very friendly, but I suspect she was fond of the old man. I told you about her daughter—how she married Montez and went off with him to Mexico. Poor Concha! There are rumors that Lupita and her husband have been killed by one of the bands of revolutionists. I fear it’s true. Montez was a hot-blooded man who would never have stood by while those bandits burned houses and drove off cattle.
>
> How trivial Mexico seems when one thinks of Europe nowadays.

Well, the war has one tiny bright side for me: it keeps the major interested, keeps his mind occupied. If he had his way, we'd declare war on Germany to-morrow. I wish you could see his study. The walls are covered with maps on which glass-headed pins mark every change in the front. He's subscribed to a lot of newspapers, and, though his eyes trouble him a great deal, he reads a little every day. When some one of the neighbors drops in, or Bob runs down to spend Sunday with us, the major's in his element. He becomes the military man, explains the functions of infantry, cavalry, artillery, talks of enveloping and flanking movements, tells how Joffre might have made the Marne an overwhelming victory for France, and what the Russians would have done under a commander like Lee! But I mustn't make fun of him. If he were a few years younger, he'd be in the thick of it. Sometimes I'm shocked to find myself thinking, "Thank God for the war!"

The time has come, Píc, when I must tell you something I hoped you'd never know. I can't keep silent any longer. I need your help. Nearly a year ago I wrote you that Blaise had asked me to marry him and that he and his father had quarreled. Píc, your brother has never set foot in the house since that day.

At first he used to write me. I had a letter from San Francisco, one from Honolulu, and two or three from the Philippines; but six months have gone by since his last letter and now I don't know where he is or whether he is alive or dead. Your father has never mentioned the trouble to me, nor have I told him that Blaise and I are engaged. We play a kind of game, pretending that nothing has happened, that Blaise may be back at any time. I don't know what they quarreled about. Perhaps I suspect, but there's no need of repeating the chance words one overhears. Blaise told me before he left that he'd never return till his father apologized for something he'd said. I thought he was in one of his cold passions—that he'd come home in a few days—that the quarrel would be forgotten. I was happy while I still believed that, but now I know that I was wrong.

He has never written to you, has he? No, I'm sure you would have told me if he had. But please, Píc, if ever you have word of Blaise, don't wait to write me—cable at once. Have you any friends to whom he might write? It's humiliating to inquire his whereabouts of others, but I'm past caring for that—I want to *know*! Perhaps he is in want at this moment—ill and friendless in some foreign place. If he does write you, or any of us succeed in discovering where he is, please write him without wasting a day. Tell him that his father is

growing old and needs him; that he must swallow his pride and ask forgiveness; that his place is at home; and that he must learn to be patient with the old man who loves him more than anyone else in the world. Perhaps he'll listen to you. How I wish poor Blaise had your sweet temper, your patience, and steadiness . . . but I love him with all his faults.

Pícaro laid down the letter with a sigh. He thought of Rita. . . . It was as he had foreseen so long ago: the girl who loved Blaise would have her tragedy to live out. And his father—that was tragedy of another kind. He knew better than Rita the depth of Major Langhorne's affection for his younger son, knew that Blaise was the foundation on which the edifice of the old man's dreams was built. "Remember," the father had said on that morning nearly three years before, "the family comes first!" Now Blaise was gone in anger, and, thinking of his brother's haughty and unforgiving nature, Pícaro shook his head. It was not likely that Blaise would be the first to speak. Where could he be? He might have written Rita, at least! But Blaise always took, never gave. . . . Pícaro felt a sudden anger at this young man who accepted all the world offered and gave nothing in return. So his own sacrifice had been in vain. Sacrifice? He smiled a little at the thought. It was not for Blaise's sake that he had stepped aside. What had his motive been? Love of Rita, perhaps—her confession that day in the sailboat—the knowledge that Blaise held the first place in his father's heart. Honolulu—the Philippines. . . . Supposing Blaise were dead? He would have to go home in that case. Was it possible that Rita might change? No . . . the Guadalupe was a graveyard of memories, best left undisturbed. He had made a niche for himself in another world; he was reasonably happy in his work. Would it be wise to arouse the old dreams, to awaken memories of his childhood, of Doña Margarita, of the girl who might have made the old ranch what it had once been in his eyes?

Well, he must write her to-morrow and give what comfort he could. Home seemed very far off nowadays—the old life unreal and dim. He closed his eyes, attempting to conjure up a picture of the house, of his father, of the girl he loved. At this hour they would be sitting down to dinner, and old Julius . . . but, no, Julius was dead. Pícaro's eyes remained closed and he nodded drowsily. He was very tired; it had been a hard day at the factory. Pfeil's British contract—that would mean increasing the output to ten motors a week. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

Winter had passed and spring was in the air. In the cafés, where groups of hardy *permissionaires* were beginning to be seen at the outdoor tables, the talk was of the Russians and of an offensive on the western front—in Artois, perhaps.

Pícaro and Orsay often dined with Pfeil at the Séville; two or three times each week the partners met at his table and lingered till the early closing hour—to watch the crowd gay with uniforms, to discuss the progress of the war, to speak of their own affairs. One evening, at the end of a warm day of sun and mist, the lawyer spoke of a new venture in which he was about to engage. He raised his coffee, sipped delicately, threw back his head, and smacked his lips. Then, as if moved by a sudden recollection, he drew from his pocket the red-bound notebook Pícaro had seen before.

"Here it is," he remarked, his black eyes glancing up at the American. "I'd forgotten his name. I know that your country has more than a hundred million inhabitants, but tell me, do you chance to know a Monsieur Foster, of New York—an engineer?" Orsay looked up with a smile.

"Bradley Foster?" asked Pícaro in some astonishment. "I know him well, and Orsay knows him, too!"

"You know him, eh? Well, I'm not surprised; the world is small. May I ask, without indiscretion, your opinion of this American engineer? He comes to me well recommended."

Pícaro smiled at Orsay before he spoke. "I can tell you nothing but good of him," he said. "We were together in school, and since then he has made his way in the world. He's honest, clever, full of ambition, and a worshiper of success."

"So you were in school together!" remarked Pfeil. "Tell me more of this young man. I'm interested."

"Well, he's a type, more than an individual—the product of a society Europe doesn't understand. Here in France I can see that business is only one of a hundred careers. Your young men can go into the army or the Church, can be artists, poets, novelists, or men of pure leisure if they have the means. It is different with us. Now that the old frontiers are gone, we are a nation of business men, and business success is the only proof of manhood left . . . like the ordeal each Indian lad was forced to pass before he could call himself a warrior. We don't take the peace-time soldier very seriously, and the man of leisure is regarded with open contempt. Art and letters are considered trivial, frivolous, vaguely effeminate; the man who dares to write stories or to paint

can only gain public approval by achieving wide publicity or startling commercial success. Foreigners speak scornfully of the dollar and call us a race of money grabbers; they don't understand that the dollar is no more than a symbol—a proof that the ordeal has been passed. The Indian had his bonnet of eagle's feathers; the business man has his balance at the bank. And the man who makes money must spend it. Saving, in your sense of the word, is unknown in the United States." Pfeil was leaning forward with his elbows on the table. "And Foster," he asked, "his judgment is good? He's not a visionary?"

"He is, in a way," said Pícaro. "Like many of my countrymen, he has his dreams, but they are concerned with shining vistas of machinery, so complex that the men who feed and oil these tireless mechanisms are no more than attendant slaves, needing neither intelligence nor skill. And the machines exist for one purpose alone: to increase the power of their creators."

Orsay lit a cigarette and tossed away the match. "Our friend puts it well," he observed to the older man. "He has put into words the spirit of the great factories such as I visited in Detroit. It's a new religion: the worship of machines and of what the Americans call efficiency—the performance with one gesture of a task which heretofore has needed two. Foster is a priest of that religion. If he dreams, rest assured that his dreams will one day become reality!"

"Yes," added Pícaro, "I've known him for more than seven years and his record is the proof that his judgment is sound. But why do you ask?"

"I was coming to that," replied Pfeil. "Your friend will be here within a fortnight. He represents a group of American manufacturers, and in the affair they propose everything will depend on the character of the man in charge. It was Foster's idea. We've ordered immense quantities of war material in America, but there are difficulties of inspection and acceptance, as well as the risk of submarines. Why not install your methods and your machinery in France, bring across a few skilled men to superintend, and manufacture here with materials shipped in the raw? Well, Foster is coming to see me, and if I think well of the affair I am to find half of the capital in France."

"Sacred Foster!" exclaimed Orsay. "A good chap, eh! I'll be glad of a chance to return a few of the favors he did me. When do you expect him, Monsieur Pfeil?"

The lawyer was signaling the man to fetch his hat and stick. "I must leave you now," he said. "D'Urville is here on leave and I have an appointment with him. I'll let you know about Foster. He's coming by way of England, I believe."

One Sunday morning, not long after the dinner at the Séville, Pícaro was

sitting with Foster in the sunny blue-and-white room where he had breakfasted each day for three years. The two men leaned back in their chairs while Antoinette bustled about the kitchen, replenishing the urn of coffee. Faintly, through the open door of the pantry, Pícaro could hear the murmur of her voice:

". . . and my Jean will be back on leave next week! Monsieur Gaby said he might stop here with us. I'll put a cot in my room. Poor boy! His wife and babies are in Casablanca; only the good God knows when he'll see them again. But one mustn't lose courage—the concierge tells me that the war may be won before the summer ends. . . ."

Foster shook his head with a grin. "She wins!" he declared. "I thought I knew some women who could talk, but the old girl makes 'em look about as chatty as a family of goldfish!"

"You'll get fond of her in time," said Pícaro. "She was just saying that one of her sons is coming in from the front for ten days' leave. . . . By the way, I took rather a liberty when I told Pfeil that you and I were too tired to go to the country to-day. I hope you feel like having a quiet day with me."

"Sure. Orsay's gone, so it's all right. I need a little rest after that trip; it's a strain wondering when one of those fellows is going to bounce a torpedo off you! Queer old bird, Pfeil! I like him, though. Maybe he'll ask us out to his place another time."

"I'm glad you like him. He's the kindest, squarest old boy you'll ever meet. If all Jews were like him, I wish the rest of them would settle in New York."

Foster chuckled. "I guess one ship could bring 'em all," he remarked. "But tell me—what do you think my chances are with Pfeil?"

"Good, I think. Take it easy and let him make the next move. Remember that these Frenchmen don't like to be hurried."

"He'll make a big mistake if he turns down this proposition. There's money in it. I suppose we could go ahead without him, but they tell me we'll need some one with a drag."

Pícaro blew out a cloud of smoke that eddied lazily above their heads, rubbed his cigarette in a saucer till the last spark was extinguished, and glanced up at his friend. Foster was developing, developing well, on the whole, though he had coarsened perceptibly. Pícaro wondered how much he himself had changed in the other's eyes. Bradley, who had been a boy three years before, was now a man. The sensitive mouth had hardened; the chin seemed squarer, the face fuller; his cheeks, once sallow with underfeeding and indoor life, were now ruddy with health. Only the black eyes, at once reflective and restless, remained the same. His manner was less aggressive, more assured. Even his clothing revealed the change, as Pícaro had observed on the afternoon of his

arrival in Paris. Success had been good for this man; the change was for the better in every way save one—the faint click of money bags, an undertone that ran through all his talk. Money was good, as Langhorne was beginning to learn for himself, but the possession of gold was not a thing to mention too often among friends.

"I've made a pot of money out of it," Foster was saying; "and I'm going to make more, but, God Almighty! This war is an insane affair! You can't afford to let yourself think about it! But if I don't get it, some one else will. If Europe wants to play cave man, I'm going to get what pickings I can! There's action in the market these days! Ever hear of Universal Motors? I got in before the public knew about their big French order for trucks, unloaded at the top of the market, and put it all into coppers before I left. I'll never have to work again unless I want to! I've got a third interest in a new apartment we're building on the Drive; the income from that ought to keep me on Easy Street. But Clara can spend it—I have to hustle to keep ahead of her!" As he mentioned his wife's name, Foster gazed down at the table, reached for a cigarette, and lit it absent-mindedly. Finally he raised his head.

"I don't know what's the matter," he said after a moment of hesitation. "Something's happened to Clara and me. Maybe it's because we have no kids—she never wanted them. But we used to be pretty happy. Now she runs around with a bunch of long-hairs—poets, foreigners, women who give you an earache on subjects like birth control. The men sponge on women like Clara—women who have some coin, can't get into society, and have nothing to do. Now she's rigged up a joint she calls a studio. . . . I'm sick of being milked to furnish pink teas for a gang that ought to be working in a boiler factory! . . . Take it from me, Píc, if ever you fall for a woman, think a long time before you marry her!"

During that spring of great events—the Dardanelles, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the battles in Artois—Pícaro was becoming known in the small world in which he moved. Pilots and famous designers visited the Langhorne-Orsay shop, and men of the allied armies sat in the small glassed-in office, speaking of names and scenes which would go down in history. And money, which had once been so hard to earn, seemed to flow in almost automatically.

June was at hand when Blaise's message came. They were finishing breakfast. Orsay and Pícaro would leave presently for their daily walk to the factory; Foster was bound for Pfeil's office, where he and the lawyer were arranging the details of their affair. The bell in the hallway rang and a moment later Antoinette came in with an envelope in her hand.

"For you, Monsieur Langhorne," she said; "it came by messenger from the hospital."

The handwriting was shaky, though it had a curiously familiar look. " 'I don't know,' " he read, when he had glanced at his two friends apologetically, " 'why I didn't write you before, to say that I was in France. Anyhow, I'm here at the Neuilly hospital and I'd be glad to see you whenever you can come. I got hurt at La Targette. Try to come soon; visitors are allowed any time after lunch. Blaise.' "

As Pícaro rose from the table Orsay saw that his face was pale. "I'll see you at the works, Gaby," he said, quietly. "So long, Brad."

Still attempting to collect his thoughts, he turned down the avenue, passed the Café des Cochers, and walked through the gates where two or three cars were stopped to have their petrol measured for the *octroi*. Blaise was in Paris, within a mile of where he stood; a soldier, lying wounded in hospital! For some reason he did not feel surprise, except at himself for not having guessed that Blaise would be in the war. It was natural, now that one thought of it—Blaise was that kind of a man.

Pícaro found himself facing a train of thought which had been in the back of his mind for many months. Well, that was finished, now that Blaise had appeared. . . . His lips moved in a flicker of self-contempt. Had he hoped that Blaise might disappear for good? Perhaps. Blaise had certain good qualities, no doubt, but his was a nature that took what it desired, without gratitude, without thought of the future, without regret. He was not the man for Rita, not the man to replace his father on the ranch. How much simpler if he had chosen to disappear—to die the death of a hero at the front. Time would have healed Rita's wounds. Pícaro closed his eyes for a moment, and in that fraction of time he seemed to see the major exhibiting to one of his friends Blaise's picture in French uniform. "You remember him, eh? My younger boy—the image of his mother. Yes, he was killed in France; died like a man, sir, within a yard of the German wire!" How much simpler that would have been. It was unjust that this willful boy should have all the good things for himself. The ranch. . . . Pícaro wanted to go back to it some day, when this war was over. He would be rich then; there were a hundred things that money would do to improve the land and the stock. And Rita . . . no woman could remain cold in the face of such a steadfast love. He felt the old dream returning. But now Blaise had turned up like something one had hoped to lose.

Langhorne glanced up and saw on the sidewalk ahead of him a woman who led a young soldier by the arm. The green-and-yellow ribbon of the *Médaille* was on the boy's breast; he walked with painful care, his face was pale, and the eyes behind his ugly blue glasses would never know the sun again. Suppose Blaise were like this poor lad—suppose he were blind, disfigured, maimed for life . . . his handwriting was strangely shaky . . . it was like him to speak casually of his wound. Pícaro felt a hot surge of shame.

While he stayed safely in the rear, living the softest of lives and profiting by France's distress, Blaise was playing a man's part—enduring weary marches, sleeping under shell fire in the mud, suffering the torture of wounds. He thought of their childhood, twenty years before. What a fine little chap Blaise had been—never telling tales, always ready for another fall from a bucking pony, or another fight with a boy larger than himself. Blaise had never lied and never shown the white feather—he was grit all the way through. Pícaro winced . . . his mind had betrayed him into monstrous thoughts, now retreating into the recesses of his brain as shadows retreat before a moving light.

One o'clock found Pícaro at the hospital. He mentioned his brother's name to an orderly, and a nurse, who seemed to be on the lookout for him, led the way up a broad flight of stairs to an inner balcony where wounded men lay on cots in the warm summer air. The nurse was an American girl, with a homely face made beautiful by the glance of fine dark eyes. She turned her head as they were climbing the stairs. "You're his brother, aren't you?" she asked in a soft voice. "You must be proud of him! He's had a bad time with his leg, but now the doctors say it can be saved. General du Tertre just came out to decorate him!" They were on the balcony and the young girl stepped aside with moist eyes. She was not new to the work, but she suffered from an incurably soft heart. Pícaro heard a weak voice—the ghost of a voice that sounded from the past:

"Hello, Píc. Glad to see you, old boy!"

Blaise lay propped up with pillows on a cot. He was smiling and a cigarette dangled from his lips; his face was pale and his right arm swathed in bandages. Even at that moment, in this air heavy with antiseptics and in these surroundings of pain, Pícaro noticed how smart Blaise had contrived to look. He was freshly shaven, and his small dark mustache was trimmed to the last hair; the army blanket covering his wounded leg might have been a steamer rug, his cheap cotton garment a silken dressing gown. Pícaro felt his throat contract as he took his hand and gazed down into his eyes, so like the eyes of Doña Margarita.

"Blaise! . . . Blaise!" was all he could say.

"I'm all right now," said Blaise, pressing the other's hand. "Here, sit on the edge of the cot. Miss Parker says you can stay for an hour or so." The girl nodded, with a charming smile.

"I was lucky to get into this place," the wounded man went on; "the attack in Artois has filled most of the hospitals. Gad, Píc, you're quite a celebrity! There was a pilot in the bed next to me—he left yesterday. When I told him my name, he asked if I were related to Langhorne, the American engineer. You've got a wonderful motor, he says."

"Hold on a minute," the elder brother interrupted. "Tell me about your

wounds. That note of yours gave me a scare, old man!" Blaise smiled.

"This arm is nothing," he said; "the *éclat* didn't touch the bone. But my leg has been bad—it still hurts like the devil when they dress it. The doc thought he'd have to saw it off when I first came here—that's why old General du Tertre came out and pinned a medal on my chest. I thought you got decorated for what you did to the enemy; they gave me this for what the *Boches* did to me! It was at the storming of La Targette. I'm in the Legion—third battalion of the *Deuxième de Marche*. It was on the morning of the ninth. There was a light mist at dawn; it cleared off as the sun rose. The bombardment was tremendous, but we had no decent observation posts. Those trenches are full of gray chalky mud; it was good to get out of them—up on firm ground again. Queer thing, that charge! My rifle and pack and extra ammunition seemed to weigh nothing at all; I floated along without an effort, lay down, got up, and floated on again! There was a machine-gun crew that played the devil with us. I killed one of them with the last cartridge in my gun, and then, while I was fumbling around with a fresh clip, a German tried to stick me with his bayonet. God! You'd have laughed! All at once I felt so tired I could hardly hold my rifle. I was afraid of sticking him, and I was afraid of getting stuck—and he seemed to be in the same fix! We were poking at each other like a couple of old women, when a shell went off with a hell of a racket, ten yards away. Something hit me a wallop in the arm. My *Boche* dropped his rifle, looked surprised, and sank down with blood trickling over his face. Then I heard 'Ping! Ping! Tut! Tut! Tut!' and felt a crack in the leg that made me sick. That's all I did at La Targette, except crawl home all afternoon!"

"You're out of danger now?"

"Sure! You'll be buying me drinks inside of a month!"

"Listen, Blaise. My partner and I have an apartment near the Neuilly Gate. There's plenty of room. As soon as they let you out to convalesce, come and put up with us."

"Fine!"

"Anything you need? How about money?"

"No way of spending it. They give us all the cigarettes we can smoke."

"If you don't mind," said Pícaro, after a moment of silence, "I'm going to cable home to-night." Blaise was studying the pattern of the coarse blanket on his knees. Finally he raised his head.

"All right, Píc," he said, quietly.

> DEAR OLD RITA [wrote Pícaro that night], prepare yourself for good news! But of course you'll have had my cable long before this reaches you. At any rate, I've found Blaise. He enlisted in the Foreign Legion a few weeks after the war began, made a fine record

at the front, and is now in hospital, recovering from the wounds he got in Artois. I saw him to-day. He's pale, of course, but quite out of danger, and it won't be long before he's up and about. He's been given the Military Medal—you and father should be proud of him!

Sometimes I'm ashamed of myself when I think of how I have felt toward Blaise. He's a splendid fellow, and your instinct was right when you fell in love with him. None of us is perfect—he has the faults of a man of action. To-day when I talked with him I was more deeply moved than I can tell you. He's so plucky about his wounds, so modest and casual about the things that he has done and seen! It seemed to me that war had cleansed him of trivialities, brought to the surface the nobility and the gay courage that are his inheritance. Go on loving him—he's worthy of it!

I'm doing my best, in my own dull way, to help the cause of France, but, after all, I'm making money out of the war, and I'm what the French call an *embusqué*. I ought to blush when I think of Blaise!

You've shown my cable to father, I know. I won't write him about Blaise until I hear from you. But I know how he feels—the thought of his boy, fighting for the Allies, and suffering wounds and winning decorations, will give the old gentleman a new lease on life! As soon as Blaise is able, he's coming to spend his convalescence with me; I'll have a talk with him some evening and I think I can persuade him to write father a letter. Everything will be forgotten, you may be sure.

My own little affairs might be summed up with the official, "*Rien á signaler!*" Antoinette is all excitement at the prospect of one of her boys coming to spend his leave with us. Think of the poor chap! His wife and babies are in Morocco, and the war may be over before he sees them again. Orsay and I spend every day at the works. Now and then I dine with old Pfeil, who's been so good to me in many ways. He's the best of friends—a Jew, a lawyer, and a fine gentleman, all at once. He has a country place near Provins, and he's turned it into a kind of home for convalescent officers; there are lots of them from the colonies who have no homes in France. Orsay has spent two or three Sundays there, and I'm hoping to go next time he asks me.

I used to tell you about a friend of mine named Foster; we were together at the institute. Well, he's here now, stopping with us. He and Pfeil are starting a company to manufacture shells. It will be jolly when Blaise comes—two beds in each bedroom and four at the

breakfast table. I'm going to try to get Blaise a long convalescent leave; he needs it, and Pfeil can do anything in reason with the authorities.

Take care of yourself and of father. I hope my news will give both of you a new interest and a new pride.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was a Sunday evening. Orsay and Foster had gone to spend the week-end with Pfeil. Pícaro had been at the hospital all afternoon and now he was dining at the Café des Cyclistes, served by the sleek Swiss who had replaced Emil. The old clients of the house were drifting back—soldiers on leave who spoke of the war in the new argot of the trenches. Poulain, the great six-day racer, was there in the uniform of a sergeant in the *Chasseurs Alpins*—a man with a face like a gargoyle carved in mahogany. Pícaro recognized others: Jacques Lemaire, the sporting journalist; Naudin, three times the winner of the annual swimming race in the Seine; the boxer l'Estrade—tall, clean and boyish-looking, with a pilot's wings on his collar and an arm on the shoulder of his mistress, Titine Latour.

"Ah, Píc, I'm in luck. You're not finished, eh?" It was Orsay's voice. He had come in unnoticed, and was smiling down as he unbuttoned his light motor coat.

"I must be at work early to-morrow morning," he went on, "so I made my excuses and left Pfeil and Foster deep in their affairs. Their plans are taking form; I was told to-day that the capital had been subscribed."

"Sit down," said Pícaro; "I can recommend this *Coquille St. Jacques*. I'm glad for Brad's sake that the money's in sight!"

Orsay called to the waiter, ordered dinner, and raised a tall glass of beer thirstily. "That's better," he remarked, as he touched the napkin to his lips; "it's been a dusty trip! When are you coming out to Pfeil's, by the way?"

"I've put it off on my brother's account. I don't like to desert him on the only day when I can spare time for a real visit."

"Of course. Pfeil understands."

"What a fine chap old Pfeil is!"

"Like an uncle, eh? I feel for that man an affection my own father never inspired! But what are you doing this evening?"

"Nothing in particular."

"What do you say to an evening at home?"

An hour later the two men were lying in easy chairs in the summer twilight. Through the open window they could hear the hum of motors on the avenue, the tinkle of a piano badly played, bursts of soft laughter from the sidewalk where the concierge was gossiping with a friend, the amorous yowling of a cat. A murmur of conversation came from the dining room; Antoinette was spending a last evening with her son, over the bottle of champagne Orsay had brought home for them. Jean had turned out a fine

fellow, taciturn as his mother was garrulous, and very proud of his new corporal's stripes.

"To see his office," Orsay was saying, "one would suppose that Pfeil lived the life of an anchorite, but in the country he lives like a prince! You should see his house, the mosaics of his outdoor swimming-pool, and his rose gardens, said to be the most beautiful in France! D'Urville's people have a *château* close by; they are Pfeil's neighbors and old friends. There's only one Pfeil—Jews and Royalists don't mix, as a rule! The d'Urville establishment is interesting. You'd like the old marquise. Raoul, you know—he's the youngest of her three sons. The oldest is Victor, a colonel of cavalry, a species of modern *beau sabreur*. Louis is the second son; I've seldom met a character more picturesque!

"Picture to yourself a tall man in naval uniform, hobbling about Pfeil's garden with a crutch. His eyes are blue; his face, where it is not concealed by a short brown beard, is tanned by years of the sun; his smile discloses dazzling teeth. In my eyes, at least, the *Capitaine de Frégate* d'Urville moves in an atmosphere of romance. You're smiling . . . listen to what Pfeil told me of his life.

"In boyhood he had only one ambition—to follow the sea. Promotions were slow in those days; at twenty-six he was the youngest lieutenant in the navy—second in command of a vessel sent out to do hydrographic work in the Pacific. One day they touched at an island of which little was known, an island with an unpronounceable name. The people were of a race celebrated for the beauty of its women, and no doubt the lieutenant had his little romance under those palms, beside those clear streams murmuring down from the mountains of the interior. At any rate, he resigned from the navy as soon as his vessel reached France, bade his family farewell, and disappeared from the world. His schooner was built at Noumea; the last that was seen of him was when he sailed away to the east. Ten years passed before his scientific work caused men to mention his name again—I confess that not being an amateur of fish, I had never heard it myself! But it seems that he's an authority where tropical fishes are concerned.

"I'd like to know the history of those ten years! In addition to science, d'Urville interested himself in politics. A Wesleyan missionary headed the party in favor of British annexation; d'Urville's princess and her clan desired to raise the flag of France. The missionary believed that he had only to make a show of force to bring a British warship and raise the Union Jack once and for all; he didn't consider the island's insignificance, nor the sleepy good nature of the Empire in those days. There was a battle; the Tricolor floated above the palms, the missionary gave his word that he'd behave himself in future, and d'Urville's princess was proclaimed queen, under French protectorate. Then

d'Urville sailed away to Noumea and returned with the seal of the authorities. That's all Pfeil knows.

"D'Urville's name was on the list of the reserves. When the war broke out, he made his way home and was given the rank he has now. He lost a leg when the *Loubet* went down in the Dardanelles; she struck a drifting mine, you remember, when she was shelling the Turkish batteries. He was one of the survivors, picked up under fire by the English boats. Now he's convalescent at home—chafing because he's refused active service, hesitating to accept the post offered him at the Ministry of Marine."

It was growing dark. Pícaro rose to light the shaded candles above the fireplace. The romantic naval officer did not interest him greatly; his thoughts wandered to Blaise's balcony at the hospital, to Rita and the Guadalupe, to the complexities of his work, at once enthralling and wearisome. But Orsay had paused, and he felt that silence would be rude.

"I'd like to travel some day," he remarked. "Why not visit your friend's island after the war?"

"Why not?" exclaimed Orsay, a look of unusual animation on his lean face. "Cities and crowds are beginning to fill me with loathing! And there are other inducements to visit that island with the unpronounceable name. D'Urville has a daughter! Her name is Tara; she is seventeen, and Pfeil's officers never fail to lose their heads!"

Pícaro was smiling in the candlelight. "It strikes me, Gaby," he observed, "that your own head is not too secure!"

On the day of Blaise's release from hospital, Pfeil asked the four friends to dinner at the Café de Séville. The fifth guest was Raoul d'Urville, a captain now—in Paris on forty-eight hours' leave from the front. Pícaro overheard the waiter whispering to an elderly civilian behind him: "Yes, the captain is d'Urville. The Americans are the friends of Mâitre Pfeil. The soldier is the brother of M. Langhorne, the engineer—yes, a volunteer in the *Légion Etrangère*." D'Urville had overheard the hoarse, whispering voice; he turned to Pícaro with a grin and a gamin's wink. There was no mistaking his love of being talked about. The American wondered if he himself were not acquiring a taste for laurels publicly bestowed. The aviator was speaking.

"By the way, Langhorne," he said; "did you know that I had one of your motors installed in my new *coucou*? It works like a charm! But the L-O's too good for these clumsy two-seaters; what would you say to seeing it in action in a fighting plane? Well, Turenne has in mind a single-seater equipped with the Langhorne-Orsay! That's news, eh! I'm changing to the *chasse* myself; there's sport to be had hunting the fat Fritz among the clouds!" He turned to Pfeil. "Name of God!" he swore, humorously, "I deserve a salary from your miser of

a company! Sacred capitalists—getting richer while a poor soldier like me has to struggle along on his pay!"

Pfeil pecked at his entrée, decided that it was good, and finished a mouthful before he replied. "Your pay!" he remarked. "My friend, the pay of a captain wouldn't keep you in cigarettes! Come. I'm going to prove my gratitude by asking another favor of you."

"What is it?"

"It's this, Raoul; Langhorne's brother here has confided to me that his dream, his secret ambition, is to fight in the air. I know you suffer from many requests of this kind, but I ask you, nevertheless, to go to the Ministry and effect this young man's transfer to the Flying Corps."

D'Urville laughed aloud and reached across the table to seize Blaise's hand. His bluff good humor dominated the company. "That's settled!" he said. "I was afraid you were going to ask me something difficult! You're wise, Langhorne. There's no more sport on the ground!"

Pfeil passed his hand over his bald head. His life was devoted to the service of others, but he hated to ask the smallest favor in return. His guests did not observe the little sigh that escaped him.

"You're a good fellow, Raoul," he said, after a moment's pause. "Come, my friends, here's the champagne—we'll drink the captain's health!"

Orsay had gone to bed, and Foster was still amusing himself at one of the forbidden dancing clubs. The night was very warm. Blaise lay in pajamas on his brother's bed. Pícaro was sprawled on an army cot by the window, where the faintly stirring air played agreeably on his bare shoulders and chest.

"It was a piece of luck," the younger man was saying, "that you happened to know d'Urville! Gad! I can hardly wait to begin training!"

Pícaro turned his head. "Isn't it pretty risky?" he asked. "Has a pilot much chance of getting through the war?"

"Well, d'Urville's alive so far. He's one of the best in France! He's shot down three Germans with his slow-seater plane, and now he's changing over to the *chasse*—the speedy little single-seaters that do nothing but fight. That's a man's game, Píc!"

The elder brother sighed, twisted his body restlessly, and passed his fingers through his thick fair hair. A man's game. Yes—the greatest game of all, in the greatest of all wars. He, too, had had his dreams. Woman's love, adventure beyond the wildest imaginings of boyhood. . . . Blaise seemed born to the good things of life. For an instant Pícaro was seized with madness. He would go to Pfeil to-morrow—give up his work at the factory—enlist as Blaise had done! He would show Rita and his father that he could play a man's part at the front! Then he thought of Pfeil, of the lawyer's confidence in him, of their unfilled orders from the government. He remembered, as though they had been spoken

yesterday, Pfeil's words when the orders for mobilization had appeared. "Both of you will wish to serve France. Remember one thing—you'll serve her best by staying where you are! Don't lose your heads, my friends!" He sighed again, and this time his sigh was like a groan. He rose on one elbow, tossed his burned-down cigarette out into the night, and lay back with hands folded behind his head. . . .

"Blaise," he said at the end of a long silence, "do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead, Píc."

"Have you written home since you've been in France?"

Blaise lay gazing at the ceiling. There was a moment's pause, and when he spoke he did not turn his head. "No."

"Listen, Blas," Pícaro used the name of old days on the ranch, "I have no right to meddle in your affairs, but I'm your brother and we both love the people at home. I know you hate writing letters, old man, but sit down tomorrow and let them know that you're alive and well." The other continued to gaze at the ceiling with unwinking eyes. If he felt emotion, the expression of his handsome face betrayed no sign. At last he spoke.

"I should have written Rita," he admitted—"but father—Oh hell! I've a mind to tell you about it."

Pícaro raised his hand. "Don't! I'd rather not know. Whatever the trouble is, it's past and ought to be forgotten. He's an old man now—stubborn and a little imperious; I'll venture a guess that you've been waiting for him to speak first. Pride's a fine quality in its place, but don't let it stand between you and the old gentleman; he's the best friend you'll ever have."

Blaise was rising from the bed. He struggled to his feet, took two limping steps and stood over his brother, smiling down with outstretched hand. Perhaps he had stared too long at the ceiling, for his eyes winked and seemed a little moist.

"You're right, Píc," he said in his soft voice. "Shake hands! Lend me a pen and some paper, will you? I think I'll start a letter now."

A day came when the mail from America brought Pícaro his reward—a letter from Rita, full of her new happiness.

> It would do you good [she wrote] to see your father since Blaise's letter came! I don't know what he said, but the major sat up half the night, writing a thick letter he asked me to post in San Ygnacio. All our pretending is at an end. Blaise sent a picture of himself in uniform. It stands beside the clock in the study, and every time I pass the door I catch his father standing by the mantel. If

looking at a picture could wear it out, there wouldn't be much left of this one. How handsome he is, Píc! You mustn't laugh at me for believing that suffering has consumed everything in his nature that was not generous, and fine.

It's hard to think of him wounded and in hospital so far away. I'd give ten years of my life to be in France, where so many poor fellows are in need of care! Blaise says your friends have arranged for his transfer to the Flying Corps. He'll make a splendid pilot, I know; our English papers say the best airmen are polo players and horsemen with good hands. But it makes me shudder to think of him fighting in the air. Isn't it fearfully dangerous? It seems silly and feminine to ask a soldier to be careful!

I've often told you of the major's interest in the war. Try to imagine what it must be now that he had a son wounded, decorated, and transferring to the Flying Corps! It's like the old days before Doña Margarita died; his eyes are brighter, his step is getting back its old elasticity, he seems more interested in his friends and in the ranch. He likes to have people come out to spend the day, and he even confessed to me that if prices were good in the fall he was planning to buy a car. Blaise wrote that I was to tell him our little secret, and I was tremendously touched at the way he took the news. It seemed to please him, Píc—I've always loved him, but we are closer than ever now.

Last Saturday Bob Tisdale came out to spend the week-end. Judge Preston and old Mr. Irving came with him. Our Sunday dinner was the happiest occasion since you left the ranch. The men spoke of you and of your services to the Allies; of Blaise, of flying, of the war. The major fairly beamed; he chattered, if one may speak of him in words so undignified. Finally he pushed back his chair and stood up to make the most charming little speech—telling them that Blaise and I were engaged to be married, and proposing Blaise's health and mine. None of you young men can do this sort of thing! Afterward, when the glasses were set down, Judge Preston was the first to give me a kiss . . . for some silly reason I nearly cried.

Afterward, in the study, I heard the major saying: "Its as I've always said, gentlemen—artillery, and artillery alone, will win this war! Think what the Russians could do if only they had the guns!" Can't you hear him, Píc! All the old military interests seem to have come back, after fifty years! In our part of the world he's become the acknowledged authority on the war. His friends listen to him by the

hour, and I think he was secretly delighted a few days ago when a man from the *Post-Tribune* motored out for an interview. I'll send you the clipping by the next mail—a whole page in the magazine section. He's writing another article now. I saw the title: "If Napoleon Were in Command To-day." I wonder what *would* happen if Napoleon were in command?

Since the *Lusitania* went down there are not many neutrals left. People are beginning to realize that this is our war and that the sooner we take our place beside England and France, the quicker it will be won. For the first time in my memory, the major is showing an interest in politics. You should hear his remarks and Bob's about an administration which counsels us to be calm!

I've been reading over your last letter and I know how hard it must be for you, Píc dear. I'd like to be in France, and you'd like to be at the front. . . . Blaise is the lucky member of the family! Well, try to get him to spend his leaves with you, and persuade him to write his father as often as he can. I must say good-by now. God bless you both and keep you safe.

CHAPTER TWELVE

On the Saturday following the dinner at the Séville, Pícaro motored out to Provins with Orsay, to visit for the first time Pfeil's place in the Seine-et-Marne. They traveled in the new car which Jules Ronsard, in an unexpected burst of generosity, had presented to his former designer. Blaise had excused himself; he was not yet strong enough for such a trip.

The moon was nearly full, and after his months of Paris, Langhorne enjoyed the long swift journey through the summer night. At last they entered a rolling country of scattered estates and game preserves, turned into a curving, poplar-bordered drive, passed a darkened lodge, and drew up under the porte-cochère of the lawyer's house. Pfeil was waiting to welcome them. When the car had been put away he took a candle from the hand of a gray-haired butler who struggled to conceal a yawn.

"Go to bed, Jacques," he said, kindly; "and you, my friends, will you have a sandwich before I show you to your rooms? Or a glass of wine? No? We keep early hours in the country."

Pícaro was long in getting to sleep that night. Lying in the cool bed, in linen faintly scented with lavender, he felt stealing over him a peace he had not known since his mother's death. The door into the next room was open, and, listening intently, he could hear the deep, quiet breathing that told him Orsay was asleep. The night was very still. It was not like Paris, where the tension of the war was in the air, where even in the hours past midnight one felt hemmed in by encircling life. The moonlight streamed in through wide French windows giving on a balcony; the air was perfumed with flowers and vibrant with a far-off soothing chorus of crickets and frogs. Suddenly, in the garden below, a bird began to sing, and Pícaro realized that he was listening for the first time to the song of the nightingale. The rich liquid notes carried him far away—to the distant shores of the New World, to the room where he had lain awake on just such nights as this, his childish senses thrilled by the singing of the mocking-bird, perched on the topmost twig of the old oak outside. Sometimes, on those nights, the door opened softly and he became aware of his mother, all in white, with her hair in a dark braid hanging below her waist. It was her custom to bend over to kiss him without a word, before she sat down on the bed, stroking his hair gently as they listened together to the song they loved. At last she would rise with a little sigh. "Good-night, my Pícaro," she used to murmur in her caressing voice. "I could sit all night with thee when the *burlón* chooses to sing!" Another kiss and Doña Margarita would move away over the tiled floor—noiseless as a shadow.

The nightingale's last note died away and Pícaro whispered drowsily under his breath two lines of a poem in which he felt a new beauty and a new significance. His eyes closed; when the bird took up its song again there were no waking ears to hear.

Orsay's voice awakened him. The windows opened on a world of gay sunlight, and his friend stood by the bed, smiling at Pícaro's bewildered face.

"Come. It's nine o'clock! I hated to wake you, but you're missing the best part of the day. One sleeps gloriously here at Pfeil's! He's been up since dawn, at work among his roses. No, don't dress. Jacques will bring you some coffee and when you've had a cigarette we'll go for a swim."

Half an hour later the two friends, in wrappers and bathing suits, were walking gingerly along the graveled path leading to Pfeil's swimming pool. It proved a singularly beautiful place, laid out with a cunning eye for color, for light and shade. Tall willow trees overhung the path about the pool, and the morning sunlight, filtering through their leaves, cast changing dappled patterns on the water below—spring water so clear that one's eyes could follow the blue patterns relieving the white mosaic of bottom and sides. Pícaro threw off his wrapper and was about to plunge in, when he heard the sound of a horse on the drive and saw Orsay look up with one of his rare, brilliant smiles.

"That must be Tara!" he exclaimed. "I hope so! I want you to know her."

The horse was approaching at a limping trot. Presently, through a gap in the trees, Pícaro saw a young girl astride a beautiful bay horse. Orsay called to her; she sprang to the ground and made the reins fast to a limb before she spoke.

"*Bonjour!*" she called, gayly. "So you've not forgotten our rendezvous!"

Orsay turned with a little bow toward the American. "Mademoiselle d'Urville," he said, "I present my friend, Monsieur Langhorne."

Pícaro found himself almost tongue-tied before the girl's strangely vivid charm. She was hatless, and her hair circled her head in heavy braids. She wore a man's light coat over a bathing suit of dark-blue stuff; her legs were bare and her small bare feet shapely and browned by the sun. Her skin was of the clear golden tint for which the women of Andalusia are admired, and in her full lips, made for laughter, and the depths of her dark eyes, luminous as the eyes of a deer, one recognized the stamp of an exotic beauty, alien to European soil.

"I'm going in," she was saying. "Grand'mere would be scandalized if she could see me, but what's the use of dressing when one can come by the bridle path!"

She shook off her coat with an impatient gesture. Next moment she dived so cleanly that the water was scarcely disturbed, and began to swim along the

bottom with long easy strokes. The two men stood watching her. She reached the far end of the pool, turned—still under water—and swam back, a lovely shadow in the depths, graceful and leisurely as a creature born to the sea. She rose to the surface, shook the water from her eyes, and drew herself from the pool to stand beside them—without exertion, with what seemed a single swift easy movement. Marveling at the strength concealed in a body so slender and outlined by such enchanting curves, Pícaro thought of the mornings at home when he had watched the seals at play on the rocks off Toros Point. That was it . . . this girl moved with the same economy of gesture, the same almost lazy grace. He saw her extend an exquisite bare arm to touch Orsay's shoulder.

"Here's Uncle Fernand," she announced. Pfeil had stepped out from beneath the willows, a black *beret* on his head and a pair of pruning shears in his hand. "Good morning," she called. "What time is it? I'm afraid it's late!" The lawyer glanced down at the watch on his wrist.

"Ten o'clock," he answered. The girl gave a little cry of dismay.

"*Aué!* I must hasten home!"

She took up her coat and walked toward the tethered horse. The animal lifted its head as she approached, and gazed at her fixedly with dark, intelligent eyes.

"He was my uncle's," she explained to Pícaro. "Uncle Victor is a colonel of dragoons. Poor Sidi! His shoulder was hurt on the Marne, and now he is *reformé*. Sometimes I ride him a little, very carefully."

Orsay had walked away at Mademoiselle d'Urville's side, and when the pair disappeared among the trees, Pfeil turned to Pícaro.

"She's charming, eh?" he observed. "And Orsay . . . he has a cool head, but there are times when I fancy he may lose it! Well, I'd be delighted, for one! She's the daughter of Louis, the *Capitaine de Frégate*, who lost a leg in the Dardanelles when the *Loubet* went down. An adventurer, that fellow—he's led a life of the most bizarre! There's wild blood in the girl—her mother was a species of savage princess, ruler of the island to which Louis will one day return. Come, when you've had your bath—I want you to see my roses!"

The path led through an opening in a hedge of yew enclosing two acres of beds where roses of a hundred colors bloomed. "There are the ones I love best," Pfeil was saying, "the most beautiful of all—your fanciers call them hybrid teas. Your mother loved roses? Then you'll recognize many of my favorites. The old varieties are not easy to improve! La France you know, eh? These peach-colored petals with the reverse of rosy pink. Papa Gontier will be an old friend; perhaps you're acquainted with Ophelia yonder and with Mrs. Aaron Ward? See this white rose. Let me give you a bud. One of the loveliest, though we are guilty of treason to admire it, for its name is Kaiserine Augusta

Victoria! Ah . . . Here are my children! See this—I've named it Étoile d'Alsace! And this one of pale salmon-color shaded with carmine—this, my friend, is the Maître Fernand Pfeil! Vanity! Vanity! Blossoms that wither and fade!"

They strolled on through the scented beds, while the lawyer paused now and then to snip and shear with cunning hands, or to exclaim at the beauty of some blossom more perfect than the rest. Pícaro was thinking of the man at his side—of the contrasts in the nature of this shrewd man of affairs who loved flowers with the passion of an artist for his art. What a friend he had proved himself! What an odd, quaint old fellow he was, with his glittering black eyes, his bald head, and his bird-like gestures!

"Since it is Sunday," he was saying, "my *reformés* have gone to Provins to hear Mass. I have a dozen of them here, learning my old trade of gardening. When the war's over, they'll be able to support themselves. Sometimes I have officers in the house, convalescents whose homes are in the colonies; but the last of them returned to the front a few days ago, and no more have appeared. One does what one can, but I'm glad of a respite now and then. By the way, we'll go to the d'Urvilles' for tea this afternoon. The marquise asked me to bring you. Victor and Raoul are at the front, but Louis will be there—he's only a few weeks out of hospital."

The château was half a mile away. Toward mid-afternoon the three friends strolled through the woods, following Tara's bridle path, and emerged on the open lawn before the house, where they found Madame d'Urville with her son and granddaughter, in an arbor shaded by the rich foliage of American grapes. Tara lay asleep in a long wicker chair. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, a ray of sunlight played on her bright tumbled hair, and one stockinged foot, eloquent of young strength relaxed, appeared beyond the hem of her skirt, above the white slipper on the gravel floor. Close beside the young girl, Pícaro saw a man in the uniform of a naval officer—a bearded man with a bronzed face and wrinkles about his keen blue eyes. A crutch stood by his chair—one of his legs had been amputated above the knee. He had not perceived the visitors, whose feet made no noise on the thick clover of the lawn, and as they drew near, Captain d'Urville stretched out a hand, with a lazy and affectionate gesture, to touch his daughter's hair. The old marquise was poised on the edge of a rustic bench, busy with her interminable war-time knitting. There was a legend in the family that her shoulders had never touched the back of a chair. She sprang up as Pfeil appeared—bowing with a smile and a finger at her lips. The captain picked up his crutch and struggled to his feet.

"Come to the house," the old lady whispered as she took Pfeil's hand. "Don't wake the child—she's not finished her *sieste*." She was slender and

vivacious at an age when most women divide their time between the doctor and the priest. Her hair was white and her blue eyes faded, but the arched brows were still dark, and the profile, renowned in the days of the third Napoleon, still preserved its aquiline delicacy. They were at the door.

"Go sit on the terrace with Louis," she said to Pícaro, with a smile and a little tap of the knitting needles in her hand; "*pauvre cher*—he's bored to death with only women's company! Are you interested in fish? If not, don't mention them! I'm off to see about our tea." The captain was calling to him in English, in a rough, hearty sailor's voice.

"You'll join me, eh, Langhorne? Your friends turn up their noses at a whisky and soda!"

Presently Madame d'Urville led the others around the corner of the house. Orsay and Pfeil carried plates heaped with sandwiches, and a man followed with a tray that bore cups and a steaming samovar. Tara, at Orsay's side, was laughing at something he had said. She was still faintly flushed from her nap, but her dark eyes sparkled with fun and she seemed even lovelier than at the swimming pool. Orsay's lean face was alight with an animation rare in him; they made a handsome couple, Pícaro thought . . . he had never seen a woman half so beautiful. Why . . . Rita would seem washed-out, almost insignificant, beside the vividness of this exotic girl!

Orsay had gone to bed and Pfeil and Pícaro sat smoking in the moonlight, outside the lawyer's door. Langhorne had been on the point of following his partner upstairs. He had no desire to sleep, but he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Something new had come into his life that day—something pleasant, disturbing, strange. His lips were parting to bid his host good night when Pfeil had suggested a last cigar in the garden. Pícaro felt that it would be churlish to refuse.

"An interesting fellow, that Louis," Pfeil was saying; "a fierce individualist, a savage at heart. It's in his mother's blood, she was a Mademoiselle de St. Palais, a granddaughter of the marquis of revolutionary days. He must have been a *numéro*, that old aristocrat! The blue eyes come from him, the hot temper, the intolerance of convention and restraint. You've heard the story of St. Palais and the tribunal of Republicans? No?" Pfeil chuckled, blew out a cloud of smoke, and passed his hand over his bald head.

"Like other men of birth," he went on, "St. Palais was thrown into prison for no reason in particular, and left there until the tribunal had leisure to examine him. At last the day came. The magistrate was a former butcher—a great burly fellow with a red face and a reputation for wit. 'What's your name?' he roared out, threateningly, when the marquis's turn arrived. 'Marquis de St. Palais.' 'The word *marquis* no longer exists!' shouted the butcher, still

more threateningly. ‘De St. Palais, then.’ ‘*De* was the sign of nobility; that word no longer exists!’ ‘Well, St. Palais, if you prefer that.’ ‘We’re through with saints—that word no longer exists!’ The court and the spectators were cackling with laughter by this time, and the marquis was permitting exasperation to get the better of prudence. ‘Very well,’ he observed; ‘you may call me Palais, if you wish.’ The butcher saw his chance. ‘There are no more palaces,’ he replied with a grin; ‘that word has ceased to exist!’ This baiting an aristocrat was sport! But the marquis was not a man noted for patience. ‘*Eh bien*,’ he remarked, dryly, with a glitter in his cold blue eye; ‘in that case let me point out to you a word that *does* exist!’ And he proceeded to mention one—monosyllabic and precisely fitted to the situation—perhaps the least mentionable word we French possess. The butcher sprang to his feet, grinning with delight. ‘Ah!’ he shouted, holding up for silence a hand like one of his hams. ‘Now he speaks a language we can understand! Release the prisoner—he’ll make a citizen after my own heart!’ ”

As he finished his story, Pfeil rose and tossed away what was left of his cigar. “Bedtime,” he said as his hand went up to smother a yawn. “We must get an early start. Jacques will bring your coffee at five.”

Upstairs, in the room flooded with moonlight and perfumed with sweet garden scents, Pícaro undressed mechanically, felt for his pajamas, and lay down in bed. His mind was busy with new trains of thought. Another year would make him a rich man, with leisure for travel, for study, for the research he had once loved. Did he love it still? Only yesterday the prospect had been without power to allure his mind—he had felt that the end of the war would find him at a loose end. But to-day all that was changed; the past was taking on a new significance; the future seemed pregnant with rich and varied possibilities. Blaise could have the ranch, have Rita. That was finished. . . . The central figure, about which the bright patterns of the future wove themselves, was the figure of Tara d’Urville.

Was the thought disloyal to his friend? No, Orsay was free to win her if he could, but Pícaro felt a surge of confidence in his power to make this new and alluring dream come true. Knowing less of Tara than of many chance acquaintances in the past, he permitted his fancy to endow her with all the qualities men admire in womankind. He realized suddenly that he had been longing for a home; for the mate without whom no man’s life is complete—for a woman to cherish, to caress, to protect from all that was harsh and unpleasant in the world. And Tara was the woman. He saw himself crossing the ocean with her after the war, exhibiting to his friends and to his family this beautiful exotic wife. His thoughts wandered on—he would build a place not far from the old ranch; there were superb house sites among the hills south of the

Guadalupe. . . .

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pfeil had run down to Provins for a last Sunday in his gardens before he closed the house. Jacques, the old butler, was upstairs, helping a pair of women to set things straight for the winter, to air the rooms, to put the linen away. The autumn afternoon was warm, and the Maître Pfeil's coat was off as he bent over his roses, snipping, pruning, cutting back. He straightened himself with a little groan as his ear caught the sound of a footstep on the graveled path. Madame d'Urville was approaching at a leisurely walk.

The lawyer bent to kiss her hand; when he chose, he could be a very courtly old man. "I'm sorry, Pfeil," she said. "I know that this is your last day and that you'd prefer to be left in peace, but I want a little talk with you. Where can I rest my old bones? In the summerhouse?"

"Madame," he answered, with a smile of real sincerity, "you leave me too much in peace!"

The old lady settled herself on the bench with a sigh. It was not often that she walked so far. She was not a woman to come to the point by devious routes.

"Pfeil," she began, "I want to talk to you about Tara and these young men."

If he felt surprise, it was not betrayed.

"I know," she went on, "that both these boys are in love with her, and the child is very dear to me. In these matters, Louis is another child. Perhaps one of the two has touched her heart. Who knows? Tell me something of them." The lawyer folded his arms and regarded the toes of his boots for a moment before he spoke.

"Let us take Orsay first," he said. "You know his story—a left-handed grandson of Count d'Orsay, the old beau?" She nodded, a little impatiently.

"It is nothing!" she declared. "Go on!"

"Well, I find Gabriel a charming boy. His temperament is reflective; he's loyal to his friends, and they to him. His place in his profession is undisputed—Jules Ronsard told me as much. As for money, he earns more than he can spend. He had a mistress, an exceedingly charming one, by the way!—but she was indiscreet, and now he is alone." The old lady nodded again, with a look of satisfaction in her faded blue eye.

"Good! I'm not often wrong about men! Now for the American, with his eccentric Spanish name. Pícaro . . . I like it, but it has a flavor of the adventurer!" The lawyer smiled.

"What do I know of young Langhorne? Not much, I confess! Yet I've grown so fond of that boy that if he wished, he could twist me around his

finger—me, Fernand Pfeil! What shall I say? That he exemplifies all that is good in Anglo-Saxon character—that he possesses both a heart and a head. . . . No, don't listen to me—I talk like an imbecile father!"

Madame d'Urville smiled. She leaned forward to tap his shoulder with friendly familiarity. "You've said enough!" she announced. "My mind is at rest. If either of these young men does us the honor to ask for Tara's hand, he may count on my blessing!"

On the afternoon when his friends in Provins were discussing him so intimately, Pícaro lay on his bed, the smoke of his pipe eddying upward in thin blue wreaths. Blaise was at Pau learning to fly; Foster had long since set up an establishment of his own; Orsay had gone for a walk in the Bois.

Langhorne was in the agreeable mood of a dreamer whose dreams are about to come true. Since the Sunday of his meeting with Mademoiselle d'Urville, the end of each week had found him on the road to Provins. He had privileges as a contractor to the government, and by the means necessary in time of war, had provided himself with a motor car and a supply of gasoline. Sometimes he stopped with Pfeil; sometimes, when the lawyer's house was full, he put up at a hotel in the town—twenty minutes' drive from the Château d'Urville.

There had been no moment of doubt, no sense of disillusion. Tara was unique among women. Pícaro felt for her more than the desire of a man for a girl:—it was as though he sought to win the confidence of some wild creature, sleek and beautiful, which eyed him and his world with a half-fascinated distrust. And now the time had come. . . .

Orsay was returning from his walk. Pícaro heard his step in the hall, heard the door open and a whistled rendering of a song from the Folies Bergères. It was time he told Gaby. Since the summer evening when Orsay had spoken of Captain d'Urville, Tara's name had scarcely been mentioned between the friends.

Pícaro found him at his desk in the living room, sketching diagrams in a book of memoranda. He looked up with a smile.

"I'm full of ideas to-day," he said. "I believe I've solved the problem of the new single-seaters! That cam to operate the gun. . . . See here!"

But his partner interrupted him; for the moment Pícaro's thoughts were far from work.

"Gaby!" he said, abruptly, "I have something to tell you!"

Orsay swung about in his chair. "Yes?"

"I'm going to ask Tara d'Urville to marry me." The other's lean, dark face was illuminated by a brilliant smile. He rose to seize Pícaro's hand.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "She'll make you a charming wife—good as she is beautiful! And I appreciate your telling me, though I'm not a rival, alas! I

fear I'm not a marrying man!"

Pícaro was aware of a faint sense of relief.

If Madame d'Urville found Pícaro dull at lunch, she gave no sign; perhaps she suspected the significance of this unusual mood. The captain had accepted the post at the Ministry of Marine, and Pícaro was debating in his mind whether it would be best to wait another week, to call on the officer at his Paris address. Another week, damn these foreign ideas! Why not ask the old lady? With her permission, he could speak to Tara to-day!

His chance came when the meal was over, when Tara took leave of them with a smile and a little stifled yawn. The day was warm; the marquise took her knitting and led the way to the arbor where he had seen her first.

"Take that long chair," she said. "I'm sorry Louis isn't here! You are like me—I have a horror of sleep except at night! Tara has the habits of the colonies."

Pícaro's hands were a little unsteady as he lit a fresh cigarette. He had been rehearsing what he was about to say.

"I wanted to have a talk with Captain d'Urville," he began, "but I cannot wait. Will you forgive my boldness in speaking to you? It is this: I love Tara! May I tell her? May I ask her if there's a chance for me?" He was leaning forward eagerly. The old woman glanced down at her work before she spoke. When she looked up, her faded blue eyes were friendly.

"Shall I say that I'm surprised?" she asked, slowly, without a halt in her knitting. "To be candid, I've not been without my suspicions! I know that young men do not motor all the way from Paris to see an old lady and a retired officer! But are you sure of yourself? My little Tara is a strange child—there's wild blood in her, as you know." Pícaro's answer was a nod and a single word, pronounced with emphasis.

"*Bon!* You are a man to know your mind. Then I'll tell you that I'd be delighted at the match! Speak to her to-day, by all means. There'll be a moon to-night—a superb moon, and the doctor has forbidden me the garden after five o'clock. My son? He adores you. Where else will he find a son-in-law interested in his precious fish!"

Langhorne had risen and was standing before her. A handsome boy, she thought; he'd be handsomer still in middle life. He reminded her of the portraits of her Norman ancestors—tall fair-haired nobles with steady eyes and the lean frames of horsemen. Madame d'Urville knew now that she desired the match with all her heart. What was there about this quiet American that aroused in her feelings—yes, almost maternal! If only Tara cared for him, perhaps he could be persuaded to stop in France when the war was over. She would give them the château—there were other places, and the boys wouldn't mind. Great-grandchildren . . . that would be amusing, for example! The old

lady sighed. Would Tara stand in the way of these agreeable plans? An enigma, that child! Any other girl would have given signs long before this. . . .

Dinner was over. "It is the last of the summer," remarked Tara's grandmother; "a night too beautiful to waste indoors. I've a mind to disobey my wretch of a doctor, but I'm a little tired. Go smoke your cigarette in the garden—take a wrap, *ma petite*, it may be cool. I'll say good night now."

The evening was cloudless, with a round moon low in the east. Tara led the way to a seat of discolored marble and settled herself to face the moon. For a time she neither moved nor spoke, seeming to drink in with a kind of pagan happiness the beauty of the night. Her lips were parted, her dark eyes shining; at last she sighed, turning her head to glance at Pícaro.

"I didn't have time to dry my hair after our swim," she said. "You won't mind if I let it down?" Her hands went up impatiently; next moment her shoulders were hidden by waves of dusky, rippling hair.

The man beside her felt his pulses throbbing. Was it possible that she was unaware of the emotion choking him? More than ever she seemed a wild creature, alert to spring away beyond pursuit, to elude his eager hands. But Tara's hand, resting beside her on the marble seat, was not withdrawn when he covered it with his. She turned to look up into his eyes.

"Tara," he said, breathlessly, "I have something to tell you!"

She smiled and shook her head. "Don't talk!" she murmured; "the night's too beautiful!"

She moved closer to him with the gesture of a sleepy child, laid her head on his shoulder and drew his arm about her, under the heavy mantle of hair. Her eyes closed as he bent over her suddenly. When he spoke his voice was hoarse.

"Tara," he began; but she interrupted him for the second time.

"Please don't talk. Kiss me again; I like your kisses!"

"I'm dreaming of my home," she went on at the end of a long silence, "of my father's house on the island where I was born. The moon is rising above tall wooded ridges, sharp as knives. Palms stand thick on the shore. Their trunks curve upward in sweeping lines, no two alike, and the upper surfaces of the fronds are silvered by the moon. The sea wind has died away, leaving the lagoon shadowy and still; at times the *hupé*, the cool little breeze which wanders down from the mountains at night, rustles among the drooping fronds. From the reef, far offshore, comes the murmur of the sea, a sound that never ceases day or night. On calm nights like this it seems to whisper: 'Sleep! Sleep!' . . . but that is in my mother's language, and you wouldn't understand. . . ."

Tara fell silent, gazing at the moon with rapt dark eyes. She had forgotten the world about her—forgotten the man at her side.

“Listen to me,” he was whispering. “You must let me speak! Tara, I love you very dearly! Will you trust me? I’ll do my best to make you happy!”

She made no answer, but lay gazing eastward, as though her eyes discerned the far-off land of which she dreamed. He raised his hand to stroke her hair.

“Tell me,” he pleaded, gently, “have I a chance?” It seemed that at last his words were penetrating her consciousness. She stirred a little in his arms. “Tell me—will you marry me? Don’t you care enough for that?” She turned slowly and looked up at him, shaking her head. Hope died hard. “I can wait. I’ll be patient.”

She shook her head again, still in silence; rose from the seat and led the way toward the house.

Tara found her grandmother writing at a desk in her room. Madame d’Urville was a member of a society which maintained a system of canteens along the front, and, though she was too old to take an active part in the work, she busied herself at collecting funds in the Department of Seine-et-Marne. Night after night, long after the others of her household were asleep, she sat in the light of her lamp, writing in her old-fashioned, shaded hand.

“Good night, *grand’mère*,” said Tara, softly, bending over to kiss the old lady’s cheek.

Madame d’Urville looked up with a little start. She laid down her pen, put an arm about the girl’s waist, and drew her close. “Has he gone?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“He asked me to marry him.”

“And you—you care for him?”

Tara shook her head as she disengaged herself from her grandmother’s arm. “I like him,” she said, sleepily, “but Mr. Langhorne is not the man I love!”

Pícaro lay in his bed in the shabby little Provins hotel. He scarcely remembered the drive back from the château; he had put his car away automatically and taken a candle from the hand of the nodding old man who promised to call him at dawn.

The dream was over; the awakening had been abrupt. He was not a man to put twice to any woman the question he had asked. The episode was over—already of the past. Something rich in beauty and promise was gone out of his life. What was left? Home? Blaise could look forward to that. His work? Flat as a half-emptied glass of wine on a deserted table. Then suddenly in the midst of these painful thoughts his vision cleared. It was as though his mind stood embodied and aloof, watching with faint contempt the turmoil of the emotional

man. “You idiot!” the watcher admonished, scornfully. “Can you learn nothing from experience? Deal with realities! Consider Blaise—he’s hard, and he keeps a grasp on real things. Forget these dreams of romantic love. Open your eyes. Be a man!”

There was no sleep for Pícaro that night. He lay there wide eyed in a revery while the clocks of Provins struck the passing hours. At last the room took form in the gray light of another day and he heard the old man’s shuffling step on the stair.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blaise woke when an orderly flung open the door and stood there grinning—a stout figure in a soiled blue uniform and wooden shoes. His face was red; his small black eyes twinkled with good humor; his breath shot out in puffs like steam. "*Il fait beau, messieurs!*" he announced with a rich twang of the south. Four pilots emerged shivering from their blankets and began to dress; the others gave no sign that they had heard. "Bring the chocolate, Rotrou!" a sergeant shouted after the fat orderly. Blaise found a basin, dashed water over his face, and pulled on his uniform and boots.

The aërodrome was on a high plateau fringed with scrubby pines. The ground was frozen ringing-hard; the hangars rose like islands from the light mist which hung over the field. Off to the east, beyond the forest of Bezange, beyond the German lines, streamers of pale light were piercing the fog. Blaise heard the stutter and abrupt roar of motors under test; saw the four pilots hasten past him, buttoning their tunics. The mist was rising; blue patches of sky were appearing overhead. One by one the scattered pines took form as the sun dispelled the fog; they glittered like Christmas trees in their array of frost crystals, delicate as lace.

Raoul d'Urville stood by the first hangar, talking with a pale, handsome man who wore a lieutenant's *képi*. The captain's hands were in his pockets; a cigarette dangled from his lips; the fur collar of his coat was turned up about his ears. He turned his head. Blaise drew himself up with a click of his heels. "*Bon jour, mon capitaine!*" D'Urville returned his salute and advanced with outstretched hand.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "The car met you at Nancy, eh? This is the Lieutenant Hérault. Yes . . . Langhorne—brother of the American who builds motors with Pfeil." He glanced up at the sky and down at the watch on his wrist. "All right," he said to the officer; "you can get away now."

Five small biplanes were drawn up in a line before the hangar. With their blunt noses raised toward the sky, their short, rigid wings and flanks of shining silver gray, they looked like monstrous dragon-flies, poised to spring into swift humming flight. Painted on each silvery fuselage Blaise saw d'Urville's insignia—a falcon gathered in a headlong plunge, with claws outstretched to seize its pray. A pair of mechanics loafed by each machine, puffing blackened pipes and stamping in their *sabots* to warm half-frozen feet. The lieutenant and his pilots were struggling into clumsy combination suits, pulling on fur-lined boots and gloves. Suddenly d'Urville's voice rang out:

"All aboard!"

The pilots clambered awkwardly into their seats, pulling over their shoulders the straps of their belts, snapped the buckles, and nodded to the *méchaniciens* awaiting the signal.

"*Coupez!*"

The propellers rocked stiffly, swung over compression with a gulping sound of valves.

"*Contact!*"

Straining on tiptoes, the mechanics spun the wooden blades with swift, dexterous gestures, springing backward for safety as each motor coughed, stuttered, and burst into a trampling roar. The lieutenant was the first to take off. He crouched behind his windshield while his two men braced themselves to hold the lower wings. He opened the throttle. The motor bellowed deafeningly; the propeller whirled in a mist of dancing light; the machine trembled as though it were alive and straining to be off. Blaise seized his hat and turned away as a hurricane of icy wind swept into the hangar, sending scraps of paper and dust into the air. Clear above the tumult he heard the voice of Raoul d'Urville.

"*En avant!*"

The mechanics pulled the chocks from under the wheels and ran with long stiff strides, one at each end of the under wing, while the officer taxied across the field and headed into the wind. They let go and stepped back, folding their arms. The motor droned a snarling note; the tail of the machine came up; it swept across the field straight and low, at ever increasing speed. The wheels left the ground, touched, bounded, and rose to the level of a man's head. Next moment the leader of the patrol was shimmering in the sunlight, high above the pines.

The others were taking off, slanting upward swiftly into the resonant air. The leader swept overhead at two thousand feet, with three machines close behind him; the fourth was rising to join them—it fell into formation and the patrol turned away to the east, toward the lines. D'Urville was watching, arms folded and his head tilted back. When they were no more than shimmering dots in the sunlight he glanced at Blaise.

"Not bad, eh?" he remarked. "Come. I'll show you your *coucou*."

He led the way to another hangar, where a mechanic with a dark gamin's face was tinkering the rigging of a new machine. "This is Callot," the captain said. "He'll be your first *mécano*. I'll look up a helper for him to-day."

"How's the taxi, Callot?" he went on as Blaise shook hands with his *méchanicien*. "*Ça gaze?*"

The man looked up with a grin. "I ask no better, *mon capitaine*," he said.

"Take it easy at first," d'Urville was saying. "No use getting yourself killed

before you learn to see what's going on in the air! Still, the lines are quiet from here to the Vosges."

It was early afternoon—a cloudless winter day, bright and stinging cold. Blaise stood by the captain while Callot tested his machine, opening and shutting the throttle as he listened to the exhaust with practiced ears. He snapped off the spark and climbed out of the narrow cockpit, touching the fuselage as a groom strokes the shining flank of a thoroughbred. D'Urville's man appeared with the captain's combination over his arm.

Now they were out on the field, side by side, ready to take off. Raoul d'Urville turned a goggled face and waved his hand. The mechanics sprang away from the wing tips. The machine rushed snarling across the field and rose steeply above the pines. It was Blaise's turn.

Up to that moment he had felt a curious reluctance to be off—a little quickening of his pulses, of his breath; but now that d'Urville was in the air, now that the time had come, he felt suddenly calm, buoyant, full of confidence. He pulled down his goggles.

A fierce wind stung his face; his ears were filled with the roaring of the motor; he felt himself lifted as the tail rose and the withered grass streamed past beneath the wheels. He had a glimpse of hangars flashing to the rear, of the intent faces of men standing before the pilots' barrack. The faint, buoyant jarring of the earth ceased as he gave the machine its head. The captain had banked and was climbing swiftly, at a steep angle, toward the lines. God! What a motor! This was different from the worn-out Moranes and Neuports of the schools! He glanced down at the tachometer. Thirteen hundred! Too fast—twelve-eighty was the safe maximum. Now he was at d'Urville's level. The captain's machine seemed to hang in the air, almost motionless, swaying a little from side to side. Blaise could see the sudden, sure movements of the ailerons, and he noticed, as he had noticed many times before, that at certain angles the propeller of the other machine was clearly visible, seeming to stop, to revolve backward very deliberately. He opened the throttle and pulled up gently, with two fingers on the stick. D'Urville dropped out of sight in an instant—seemed to drop like a stone toward the fields bordering the Forest of Bezange.

The captain was turning to the south. Blaise glanced at the map under its sheet of celluloid. This was the front—that village of roofless houses set in pocked fields must be Bezange-la-Grande. He started at the sound of a deep, crashing cough—felt his machine rock violently and right itself. Ahead of them and a little above, a ball of sooty smoke had appeared magically. He glanced down, over the side of the cockpit. Nancy was behind them now—far off to the right; that clutter of buildings, by the bend of the Meurthe, would be Lunéville. The captain had begun to climb again—the German gunners were

getting the range. Five thousand, fifty-two hundred, fifty-four hundred—that meant seventeen thousand feet!

Blaise was cold. The air was thin and sharp—it seemed hard to get enough of it into one's lungs. His feet were cold in spite of wool and leather and fur. His hands, protected by silk gloves under heavy fur gauntlets, were so chilled that he wondered whether he could pull the trigger of his gun. He looked at the clock in its leather case. Only forty minutes gone! He was growing bored; the battery had ceased its shelling, and he and d'Urville seemed alone in an enormous expanse of sky. He had no eyes for the beauty of the world spread out beneath him—no thoughts for the strangeness of the war in the air. Forty-five minutes—fifty minutes. The captain was turning to go back. They were above the foothills of the Vosges—a pattern of narrow valleys threading dark forests of pine and fir. Far off to the south, above a landscape lost in the violet haze of distance, a line of snowy peaks glittered against the sky. Switzerland! The Alps! . . . Rita would enjoy this!

Though Blaise felt no emotion, no sense of the wonder of what he saw, his dark eyes—keen as the eyes of the condors which soared like specks above the hills at home—were ceaselessly alert. There was a primitive strain in him—mental and physical; even as a child, riding after strayed cattle with Domingo, it had been Blaise who pointed out the half-wild cow lying with her calf in a thicket of chaparral, or the patch of reddish brown that showed where a doe was bedded under dense green sumac by a hidden spring. For all his Indian blood, the foreman's eyes were far less keen.

Now Blaise was studying the front—fixing in his mind the course of the lines: forests, canals, railways, the valley of the Meurthe. Suddenly, far below and to the north, he saw three planes turning above a region of low wooded hills. For an instant, as they banked, the sun glinted on their wings; next moment they faded to dots, scarcely moving against a background of gray leafless trees. Had the captain seen them? Were they enemies? D'Urville's machine was rocking from side to side. Blaise saw him turn his head, a sphere of black leather in the cockpit. The plane ahead rolled like a diving porpoise—flashed down and out of sight. Blaise throttled his motor and pushed the stick forward; a cold wind stung his cheeks, screamed through struts and stays. Four thousand meters . . . thirty-five hundred . . . three thousand. D'Urville was dropping like the falcon painted on his fuselage. Blaise opened the throttle a little, heard the screaming of the wind rise to a shriller note, swallowed spasmodically to ease the crackling in his ears. The machines above the forest seemed to rush upward to meet them—they were banking in sharp turns. Ah! *Cocardes!* A French patrol! Blaise pulled up, feeling his cold boredom return. D'Urville was taking altitude.

They passed Blamont, passed Lunéville and the Forest of Parroy, turned

west toward Nancy and the field. Their two hours were up. Blaise saw the aërodrome, twelve thousand feet below and miles ahead. The plateau was a small round table, gray and fringed with black; the hangars were match boxes, scattered without order among pines like blades of withered grass. The patrol was over. He felt a curious relief, a sudden relaxed content. The captain was gliding toward the earth in a long, easy curve. As Blaise pointed the nose of his machine toward the field his motor stuttered and slowed. The propeller whirled for an instant, hesitated, came to a jerky stop. He was out of gasoline. He glanced down. There was a diminutive "T" by the captain's office; the wind had changed.

Callot and the second mechanic were standing before their hangar, gazing into the pale winter sky. They had heard the far-off drone of the returning planes.

"There they are," announced Callot in his throaty slang of Montmartre, "both of them! He'll make a pilot, our American. I liked the way he unglued himself from the earth!" He stepped into the hangar and came back with a pair of binoculars in his hand—the spoils of a captured German plane, given him by a pilot long since shot down in flames.

"The first is the captain," he remarked without taking the glasses from his eyes. "Yes, there's the lower wing they put in yesterday. Sacred American! He's coming down with a dead stick! And I'm to blame—no more essence. I could have put in another inch, but I thought they'd only be gone an hour or an hour and a half! Well, if he splits wood the joke's on me! Ah, here comes d'Urville! Easy! Name of a dog! There's not another like him in France!"

The veteran's wheels touched the grass lightly as floating feathers; his motor gave tongue and he sped across the field, tail up, at forty miles an hour. He snapped off the spark; the tail came down; the skid touched the frozen turf with a tearing, grinding noise.

Fifty pairs of eyes were fixed on Blaise—a thousand feet up and turning into the wind. Callot was tense with excitement. "Too high, too high," he muttered under his breath. "He'll overshoot and land among the trees. Ah!" The hollow whistling of the plane changed tone as Blaise banked steeply to the left, straightened, and banked the other way. He was losing altitude in a serpentine. Close above the treetops he turned for the last time and swept in swift and low over the field. Little by little the tail of the machine came down. The wheels brushed the withered grass, touched the earth without a bounce, without a jar; the iron-shod skid bumped twice, three times—the little plane stood still.

"*Comme une fleur!*" Callot's eyes sparkled with pleasure as he clopped across the field in his wooden shoes. His pilot was climbing stiffly out of the cockpit.

There had been no flying for three days. A south wind, blowing from the warm Mediterranean coast, had covered the sky with clouds. The rain fell day and night; the ground thawed; the pilots sat about their barrack disconsolately, or waded through mud to pass the time with idle groups of mechanics in the hangars. D'Urville cursed the weather and shook dice with the pilots in the bar—a corner of the barrack fitted with chairs, tables, and a stock of liquors smuggled into the *Zone des Armées*. Lieutenant Hérault sat in the bar, reading. From time to time, he raised one finger without lifting his eyes from his book, and the fat Routrou brought water, sugar, and a bottle of forbidden green. Blaise fancied that the captain avoided Hérault; it was odd, he thought, for the squadron had only three officers, and the other was on leave. The lieutenant's face was smooth and pale; he might have passed for a man of twenty-five, until one saw the weariness of his eyes, surrounded by fine wrinkles. He was meticulous in dress; his boots and belt were like mirrors, his linen was dainty, and he carried in his sleeve a handkerchief with a narrow purple border. He wore his hair long and brushed straight back; now and then he raised his hands to smooth his sleek brown head. A box of gold-tipped, cigarettes stood on the table beside him, and sometimes when a cloud of perfumed smoke floated across the room, d'Urville turned away with a grimace of disgust. The pilots often spoke of Hérault; Blaise knew that he was rich, clever, a reckless fighting man, and nearly forty in spite of his strangely boyish air.

The clouds broke on the fourth day and d'Urville led a patrol toward the lines. The weather was scarcely fit for flying. Blaise was left with Hérault and another pilot on alert. He watched the planes fade like wraiths in the mist, reappear in a patch of sunlight, and rise through a blue gap in the heavy clouds. An hour passed.

They were in the bar. Blaise had the dice box in his hand when he heard the faint reports of cannon from the direction of Nancy. A fair-haired sergeant sprang to his feet; Hérault glanced up from his reading. Callot was at the door, a grin on his dark, vivid face. "A *Boche*!" he announced. Another battery, nearer than the first, was opening fire.

The clouds were drifting in broken masses to the west. Directly overhead, at a great altitude, Blaise saw a cluster of white downy puffs against the blue. Others appeared as he watched—the string of snowy dots was extending to the west. Then he made out the enemy machine—a moving speck, a mote which glinted for an instant in the sun.

"Ah, there he is, the fat Fritz!" remarked Hérault, indifferently. "Too high—we'll never climb up to him, and he has only to cross to the Salient. But I'm fed up with reading. We'll try to have a little fun with him, eh?"

The sergeant was the first to take off. Blaise heard a smacking report and saw the tail of the machine sink as it slowed and came to a stop. A lump of

mud, thrown up by the wheels, had shattered one of the fragile whirling blades. Hérault took off without mishap; next moment Blaise was snarling above the pines in the lieutenant's wake. His machine seemed to bound away from the earth like a sentient creature, too long stalled.

They were skirting the edge of a towering wall of cloud which sent out streamers of thin gray mist. The clouds were closing in above them; Hérault faded and disappeared; Blaise felt the chill breath of the vapor which streamed past him; felt his machine sway and stagger; saw the world beneath him blotted out in gray. Next moment he burst into the dazzling sunlight of the upper air.

He gazed up with eager eyes. The puffs of white were scattered in a long pattern across the sky. There was the German plane, clearly visible now—broad winged and livid gray, moving serenely in advance of the bursting shells. It had turned and was heading back toward the lines. Hérault was climbing in a great curve. Blaise tingled with a sensation he had known before—on the morning when he had crouched with his company in a muddy trench in Artois, ready to spring over the parapet. Suddenly his body felt warm. His brain, his muscles, his nerves, seemed intensely alive, adequate to the task that lay ahead. The air was thinning. Five thousand meters, and the German was still above them! He pulled the stick back a little to climb at a steeper angle, but the swaying of the machine told him that it was doing its best. He glanced down for an instant and saw through a break in the clouds that they were over the lines, above the Forest of Parroy. Had Hérault been right? Was their enemy too high? No! By God! They were gaining!

The German machine was very close. Blaise could see the wheels, the landing gear, the great black crosses on the lower wings. It was a two-seater for photographic work, but the observer seemed to disregard them contemptuously. Ah—there he was! Blaise had a glimpse of a yellow safety helmet which appeared for an instant over the rim of the fuselage. Then bright sparks streamed past him; he saw streaking trails of smoke and heard the abrupt, faint stammer of a gun. As he banked sharply to one side, he saw out of the tail of his eye that Hérault had reared almost vertically, and was hanging in the air, while his gun spit smoke and fire. The lieutenant's machine fell off in a wing-slip, turned, and flashed under Blaise to turn again. Hérault was leaning forward with a light mallet in his hand, hammering at the lever of his jammed gun. The German nosed down and headed swift and straight for his field, a dozen miles behind the lines.

Blaise found himself trembling with a sudden rage; a lust, curiously hot and personal, to see this gray machine fall out of control, crumple, burst into flames. He pushed forward the stick and dove, with the wind screaming in his ears. The observer's gun was swinging to bear on him—he heard the flick of

bullets through his upper wing. The German's broad chest was centred in the inner ring. Blaise pulled the trigger, the gun stuttered deliberately, the sparks flew streaking to their mark. The observer's hand went to his throat; he seemed to nod stupidly before he sank into his cockpit out of sight.

They had passed the last of the clouds, and the earth was rising to meet them. Two thousand meters—that must be the German aërodrome—those hangars by the lake. Another burst. Damn it! Was this machine armored? It seemed impossible to bring it down. The pilot was dodging skillfully, this way and that. Hérault had cleared his gun. Blaise saw him dive under the two-seater and rear up for a long burst.

Now they were close over the treetops. The German was gliding in to land and little greenish-gray figures were running about excitedly. Blaise discovered that his mouth was open, that he was shouting at the top of his voice. His sights bore on the cockpit of the gray machine. The gun spoke—a trail of thick black smoke appeared suddenly. The German plane came to rest on the grass, enveloped in flames. The pilot sprang out and began to run toward a hangar. Hérault swept over the field; his gun crackled, and the pilot stumbled and sank down. Machine guns were going in a crooked trench by the barracks; the smoke of incendiary bullets stabbed the air. Two Germans were running out to where the dead pilot lay, and Blaise saw a dense little crowd watching stupidly in the doorway of a hangar. He loosed his gun on them—it was like spraying flowers with a hose. They scattered in panic. Two of them lay still, and another was dragging himself away. . . .

Hérault was the first to land. He stood with d'Urville in a cluster of pilots and mechanics, waiting for Blaise. The little plane drew up with a spatter of mud; the motor gasped and stopped; Blaise clambered down awkwardly to take a cigarette from Hérault's case.

Callot was counting the bullet holes, nodding with bright eyes and pursed-up lips. He caught the captain's eye. "The machine will have to be scrapped, *mon capitaine*," he said; "twenty-two holes in the wings and fuselage!"

The lieutenant drew a scented handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed at his face delicately. He gave Blaise one of his weary smiles. "Well, we had a little sport," he remarked. "Come. You and I owe these chaps a glass before lunch. See you in the bar when I've washed my hands."

He strolled away toward his quarters, and Blaise followed with d'Urville. The captain seemed thoughtful.

"You've made a good start," he said, laying a hand on Blaise's shoulder; "but there's no need of taking such risks. You must learn to maneuver so as to shoot down the enemy without exposing yourself. Don't follow Hérault's example; he's bullet-proof. He killed the pilot, eh? I don't like that, when he

was saving himself from his burning plane . . . it smells of assassination! I think we can have your victory confirmed. It will be difficult, so far from the lines, but Hérault's name carries weight."

As they entered the bar, Blaise saw that Routrou was cracking ice for a tall shaker of cocktails. The orderly's fat red face was beaming; when the captain's back was turned, he wiped his hand, grinned, and gave Blaise a hearty grip.

One evening, toward the end of January, Hérault called Blaise into his room in the officers' barrack. The lieutenant was just back from leave. He closed the door after his guest and asked him to sit down. He had an odd way of addressing the American, as though they were acquaintances in civil life.

"I've taken rather a liberty, Monsieur Langhorne," he said; "being a foreigner, perhaps you don't know that the manufacturers of our machines offer a reward for every enemy shot down. A thousand francs from the maker of the *cellule*—a thousand from the builders of the motor." He held out an unsealed envelope.

"No, you must take it," he went on as Blaise drew back; "it is customary, I assure you! The victory was yours alone. Take it—it is yours. By the way, I have interesting news. I saw your brother's friend Pfeil in Paris yesterday, and he told me that we'd be the first squadron to be equipped with Turenne's new single-seaters—the L-O motor, you know!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was the end of March. For thirty days the French had endured the German onslaught before Verdun. It was a time of depression, of suspense; the city seemed hushed, listening, holding its breath. At the Langhorne-Orsay factory the men worked in silence or spoke in subdued voices of the battle's ebb and flow. There was little laughter or horseplay at the lunch hour. Nearly every man had a brother, a cousin, or a close friend at the front. A hundred times a day Pícaro was aware of the questions in every mind: Can our lines hold? Will they break through?

He seemed to feel the throbbing of the city's heart as he strolled up the Rue Royal to dine with Pfeil. The evening was cloudy and warm; the people were taking the air on the sidewalks—a throng which moved in a hush broken by the sound of innumerable soft footfalls. There was no briskness, no laughter in the crowds. A few motors glided like ghosts toward the river; even the news venders, crying the evening papers in quaint, abbreviated slang, seemed anxious, abstracted, subdued. The men in the cafés sat without conversation, gazing at the passers-by with stolid eyes, or sipping at their glasses absent-mindedly.

Oppressed and musing, Pícaro turned into the Café de Séville. A man in evening dress was bowing before him—a stout smooth-shaven man, with dark, smiling eyes. One sleeve was empty and there was a narrow yellow-and-green ribbon in his buttonhole. It was Louis, the *maître d'hôtel*. Pícaro took the outstretched hand in both of his own. The lines of his face relaxed and his eyes smiled a greeting.

"Louis!" he exclaimed. "I was hoping to see you to-night. Monsieur Pfeil told me." The Frenchman touched his folded sleeve. "Well, here I am!" he said without a trace of bitterness. "Invalided out, and I am fortunate, monsieur! Those poor fellows at Verdun . . . they have suffered—they are suffering! But the Maître Pfeil is waiting for you."

Pfeil was silent during the meal; Pícaro had never seen him give so little heed to what he ate and drank. At last he set down his coffee cup untasted and lit a cigar with nervous hands. He glanced at his friend apologetically.

"I'm out of sorts to-night," he explained. "Do you mind if we go now? This place depresses me. I want to talk with you. We'll take a taxi to my apartment, eh?"

They drove to Passy in a stuffy taxicab piloted by a surly old man. The night was growing chilly, and when he had seated his guest, Pfeil lit the fire laid on andirons of hammered brass. He offered Pícaro a cigar, pointed with

raised eyebrows to a decanter on a lacquer tray, and began to stride back and forth with jerky steps.

"I have bad news," he said, after a short silence; "to-morrow will be a trying day for both of us. But first I'll give you news of another kind. This morning your brother shot down two Boches. Both fell in our lines—one at Belleville, the other at Charny. He's a phenomenon, this Blaise . . . nine victories in three months! He's been proposed for the Cross of Honor and will be a lieutenant as soon as the papers go through. Don't be alarmed if I tell you that he's wounded—a bullet grazed his head, but he refuses to be taken to the rear. His spirit is that of our men at Verdun. . . ." Pfeil blew out a cloud of smoke and passed his hand over his head.

"It's not easy to tell you the rest," he went on. "These are sad days for France, my friend! Madame d'Urville . . . she has the courage of a lion, but I fear that this last blow will prove too much. You knew that Victor d'Urville was dead, killed in the first week's fighting near Douaumont? A son to be proud of, the colonel—a traditional officer of cavalry, a type of the old French aristocrat. Now Raoul is dead—shot down this morning; he fell close behind the lines, with a bullet through his heart. The funeral will be to-morrow, and we must go. Louis, the only remaining son, is on a mission to Marseilles. Bring Orsay if you can. Ah, this war! What brutal stupidity! Think of those two women with no one left but a crippled officer of the navy who dreams of fish!"

The lawyer sighed as he sank into a deep leather chair. "I'm unjust to Louis d'Urville," he said, with a grave smile; "but when I think of war I lose my head! Once I lived for the day when the Tricolor would float over Alsace; now I perceive that all war is insanity—unworthy of us if there were twenty lost provinces instead of two! Name of God! Can our race, with all its progress in art, in science, in humanity, never advance beyond the need of war? Must our children, our remote descendants, kill and hate through all the centuries to come? Why did the Germans attack us? Perhaps they could scarcely answer that question themselves. . . . I think at times that war, like the disease which sweeps through an estate overstocked with game, is merely nature at work." He leaned forward suddenly, black eyes glittering and the gestures of the hand which held his cigar emphasizing his words.

"I play the part of an elderly sybarite, eh? Like all self-made men, I have a weakness for food, for drink, for pretty women, for a handsome *decor*? Well, I'll grant you all that, but I have my thoughts, like other men. What do I believe? That human happiness and human dignity are worth while! Man is a creature capable of astonishing gestures, of infinite advance! If I worship anything, I worship man, or what he might become. God? Nature? The universe? These questions are best left unasked. . . . Look!" Pfeil rose suddenly

from his chair and beckoned his guest to the other end of the room. He pressed a button, flooding with light a small marble figure standing in a niche. Pícaro stepped close for a better view. He had seen the work of many sculptors, but nothing to prepare him for this.

The figure was youthful, with rounded limbs and flowing lines of hip and shoulder and arm. It stood with folded arms and head bowed forward a little, glancing up mockingly under brows delicately arched. The hair lay in close curls above ears faintly pointed and pricked, and the lips were curved in a subtle smile, a smile of knowledge, of desire—half eager, half contemptuous. It was a work of supreme art, but as he gazed at it Pícaro felt a little shudder ripple down his spine. This creature of marble seemed about to open its lips, to whisper strange words of enlightenment, to impart a secret too odious for the ears of men. Pfeil snapped off the light.

"You've heard of the sculptor, Paul Duclos," he remarked as he led the way to the fireplace. "He was my friend. We found that in his studio after he shot himself. A genius, that poor chap; he had had a vision—what shall I say?—a glimpse of the truth, perhaps!" Pfeil paused for a moment as though he were weighing his words.

"Art has a thousand phases," he went on, slowly; "and each phase a definition of its own, but you'll not quarrel with me if I say that it is nature, reflected in the artist's eye. You shuddered just now, eh? Well, certain works of art, in greater or in less degree, give glimpses of regions better unexplored!"

The lawyer's hand touched his bald head nervously. The death of Raoul d'Urville had brought to the surface a side of his nature he had not shown before. He rose a little unsteadily and filled two glasses with brandy from the decanter on the tray.

"*Tiens!*" he said. "Let's see if a glass will drive away the blues! Forget what I've been saying—my thoughts are gloomy to-night. Here's to your brother's success!"

The light in the church was dim, and the footfalls of the people who passed in and out reverberated with faint whispering echoes. Raoul d'Urville's coffin lay in state: his *képi*, with its three narrow silver bands, at the head; his tunic spread to display the cluster of decorations gleaming in the candlelight. Even the mother would not be permitted a last glimpse of her son. The pilots who went to recover their captain's body had shuddered at what they saw. Scarcely a bone was unbroken; the features were unrecognizable; the cigarette case of heavy silver they had found in his pocket was folded and wrinkled as though squeezed in a giant's hand. Mother Earth has a harsh welcome for those of her sons who venture once too often among the clouds.

It was Blaise's turn to stand guard. His head was bound in fresh white

bandages, and his face was pale with recent loss of blood. He stood motionless by the rail, a handsome figure in the soft gray light. A pair of young women brushed past to gaze pityingly at the coffin. The taller one glanced over her shoulder as she rose from her knees. She nudged her friend. "Look! He is wounded," she whispered. "*C'est un aviateur—il est beau, hein?*" A little peasant girl was advancing timidly, with wondering eyes, leading a child of four. She wore sabots over coarse woolen stockings, and she carried on her arm a basket from which protruded a cabbage, a loaf of bread, and the neck of a bottle of wine. She set down her basket, knelt with the baby at her side, and prayed simply and audibly for the welfare of d'Urville's soul. Blaise was wishing that he might slip away to smoke a cigarette. He looked up. Hérault was walking down the aisle.

He was bareheaded and his brown hair was sleek as sealskin. His belt gleamed dully in the diffused light; his uniform was perfection, and Blaise was aware of a faint perfume of lilac as the lieutenant drew near.

"The train will arrive in a quarter of an hour," said Hérault in a low voice. "I'll stop here. You'd better take the chance for a glass of wine and a cigarette."

Many times during the journey to the desolate town close to the front, Pícaro wondered at Madame d'Urville's self-control. She glanced out of the window with interest when Pfeil pointed out to her the landmarks of the Marne; spoke of her work for the soldiers, and discussed with optimism the battle raging at Verdun. Tara scarcely moved during the long, slow trip. She sat in a corner of the compartment, hands folded and eyes cast down. Once when Orsay spoke to her she looked up at him with a grave smile. Both women were in black, for Raoul's death had found them mourning his elder brother.

At last the train stopped at a station which bore the scars of the first German advance. The crowding soldiers on the platform—men with muddy uniforms and tired, unshaven faces, stared at the travelers curiously. A hawk-nosed general of division, with a brace of staff officers hovering close by, stepped forward to present himself to Madame d'Urville. He offered his arm; Pfeil and Tara followed them to the gray limousine with its tricolor flags; the officers led Orsay and Pícaro along a narrow street.

As the little group entered the church, Hérault advanced three paces and bowed to the marquise. He did these things well, thought Blaise; his manner was the perfect blend of dignity, sympathy, and respect. But Blaise noticed that Madame d'Urville's greeting was cold and that Pfeil bowed without offering the lieutenant his hand. By Jove! What a lovely girl! What eyes! What a walk! What a silhouette in that black tailored suit! She must be d'Urville's niece, of

whom Pícaro had spoken once or twice.

She was kneeling now, beside her grandmother. . . . How gracefully she sank down on the rough floor! The old lady was an aristocrat—every gesture proved it. Already in mourning for her other son, the cavalry officer, but she kept a grip on herself! Blaise admired self-control, hated an unrestrained display of emotion. The marquise must be badly cut up, but she had entered the church as though it were a drawing-room. Now her shoulders were shaking and a handkerchief was at her eyes. She was sobbing as she prayed by her son's coffin. Blaise hoped she would master her tears before the service began.

The service was over and they were filing out of the church to follow d'Urville's body to the grave. Dusk was setting in and a fine, drizzling rain dripped from the eaves and glistened on the cobbled street. Pícaro walked bareheaded with a group of officers. Soldiers stood at the salute as the slow procession passed; now and then a civilian swept off his hat and bowed his head.

They entered the cemetery thick with soldiers' graves—hung with hideous metallic wreaths of imitation flowers, among which one discerned mottoes like, "*Tombé sur le Champ d'Honneur*," or "*Mort Pour la Patrie*." The general bowed to Madame d'Urville and stepped out to face the group of mourners. He was a small gray-haired man with aquiline features and a tired look in his eyes. As he cleared his throat, Pícaro wondered how much of his time was taken up with these brief speeches of eulogy—with these ceremonies among dreary lines of gravestones, on evenings when a fine rain drizzled under a darkening sky and the air vibrated fitfully with the mutter of far-off guns.

". . . and his qualities of courage, of resolution," the general was saying in a hoarse, monotonous voice, "will live after him, inspiring us who remain to carry on the task. He will take his place among our legendary heroes, for, like them, he was a young knight without fear and without reproach. Captain d'Urville! I salute you in the name of France!"

The general's voice broke as he uttered the concluding words. He turned away to blow his nose violently. Had long practice made him a flawless actor? Could those be real tears the grizzled officer was wiping from his eyes? Was it possible that his emotion was genuine? All at once Pícaro found that his own eyes were winking; discovered with dismay that they were wet.

This was the end of Raoul d'Urville. Nothing remained of him save the body the general addressed as though the mangled ears could hear. His courage, his generosity, his zest of living . . . these things were gone forever from the world. Were such qualities of no value to mankind? It seemed to Pícaro that they should be worth preserving in a world not too well supplied with men like Raoul. Perhaps at this moment, far away beyond the lines, a

group of mourners was standing in the rain about the grave of some young German officer. Germans were human beings, after all—no better and no worse than other men. War squandered such lives—took for granted that they were replaceable as grains of sand. He thought of Pfeil's words: "Can our race never advance beyond the need of war? Must our descendants kill and hate through all the centuries to come?" He felt a surge of anger, dull and impotent. Then suddenly his eyes seemed to open on a new world—a world of madmen, ruled by cruelty and chance.

He glanced at Tara. Until that moment he had been unable to look at her without a painful beating of the heart; the trip in the railway carriage had been a kind of torture; he had forced himself to think of Blaise and of his work. But now, for a reason that eluded him, he found himself calm in her presence, realized with astonishment that the emotions she had aroused were burned out, dead. She was leaning on Orsay's arm, her face turned away as she dried her tears. Odd that she should turn to Gaby at such a time. Pícaro studied her with curiosity. She was very beautiful, but her beauty no longer intoxicated him. She was a stranger. . . . What did he know of her, or she of him? It seemed incredible that he had kissed her—had held her in his arms. Once he had longed to make this strange woman his wife! More madness . . . another lunatic in an insane world. . . .

Madame d'Urville tucked in a black satin bag the morsel of lace with which she had been drying her eyes. She made a sign to Pfeil and took the general's arm. "Your car is waiting," she said. "Shall we go to the hotel?"

When dinner was over, Blaise and Hérault drove away through the darkened town. A few stars were beginning to appear; there would be an early patrol if the weather cleared.

Tara had gone to bed; Pfeil was talking with Madame d'Urville before an open fire in her sitting room; Orsay and Pícaro sat in the deserted café downstairs, a bottle on the table between them. The doors were locked; now and then a band of soldiers hammered for admittance, with vain entreaties and oaths. The proprietress—a woman with a coarse face and sleeves rolled up to display a pair of muscular arms—sprang up in a rage at one insistent voice. She strode angrily across the room, undid the bars, flung the doors open, and stood there with hands on her hips. "What's all this noise?" she asked, truculently, in a voice harsh and deep as a man's. "Do you take my establishment for a brothel? Do you want to have me *consigné*—have my house closed by the police? Clear out of this! Go to Titine's, where you belong! It's on the Rue Jeanne d'Arc—number nine. *Allez! En avant, marche!*" She closed the doors with a slam and returned to her cash box, muttering under her breath. Orsay caught her eye and pointed to the empty bottle. She was still muttering as she placed a fresh bottle on the table. "Soldiers—the war—I'm

sick of it all!”

Orsay glanced at his friend. “A formidable woman,” he said, when she returned to her high stool behind the desk; “and no patriot, I fear! But one can scarcely blame her—these towns in the Zone are not fit for any kind of a woman nowadays. So she’s sick of war . . . well, there are others who feel the same.” There was an ironical smile on Orsay’s lips, but the expression of his lean, dark face was serious.

“I have a confession to make,” he went on; “I’m sick of it, too! Sick of the war—yes, sick of my fellow-men! A kind of neurasthenia, perhaps, but I’ve had enough. Something which once existed inside is dead. My friend, I’m going away.” Pícaro looked up, startled at Orsay’s words. The other nodded; he had ceased to smile.

“You must forgive me,” he continued, slowly. “I should have spoken before. It’s not easy to leave you, old man! But I have considered everything, planned everything, and now I must go. Pícaro—I’m going to marry Mademoiselle d’Urville.”

Langhorne managed to smile in spite of his astonishment. Orsay was going to marry Tara! Twenty-four hours ago the announcement would have caused him pain, but now, though he was grieved at the thought of losing his friend, curiosity was uppermost in his mind. He reached across the table to take Orsay’s hand.

“I hope you’ll be happy,” he said.

“Thanks, Píc.” Orsay folded his arms and sat staring at the floor.

“Tara is only an incident,” he said without raising his eyes; “a corollary of a change I’ve felt coming over me for many months. To-day, by Raoul d’Urville’s grave, I made up my mind. I used to be happy in my work—so long as I was able to believe that it was part of a progression, always advancing, year by year. I built machines, machines which seemed to me to mark another little stride in emancipation, in enlightenment. And now the machines I build are used for killing men. . . . We advance, yes; as other nations have advanced in the past, as the waters of a rising tide advance higher and higher on the beach until the tide turns and the waves recede toward low-water mark. But there’s no reason why I should weary you with such reflections. . . .

“I’m not sure even now that I’m in love, but every man needs something real to which he can cling. Tara attracted me from the first, and when I saw that your interest was slackening, I began to frequent the Avenue Montaigne. She was unhappy in the country, and she’s been miserable since her grandmother moved to town. At last I made up my mind—I asked her to marry me. Her answer was a curious revelation. Another year of Europe would kill her, she said; she had asked her father to take her home, and his refusal had

made her desperate. Now she was planning, vaguely as a child, to run away, to make her way alone to her unpronounceable island on the other side of the world. Would I take her there—would I promise to live there? If so, she would marry me.

"It wasn't easy to ask for time, but no man could make such a decision at a moment's notice. I tried to explain the difficulties of abandoning my work, of leaving Pfeil, of leaving you. At last I persuaded her to wait three months. To-day, as I told you, I made up my mind. I'll take her away as soon as our affairs can be set in order. There'll be difficulties, but Pfeil will understand."

There was comprehension in Pícaro's eyes as he glanced at his friend. "It's odd," he observed. "If you'd told me this yesterday, I wouldn't have understood. To-day it is different. For the rest, I fancy you're right and that others will agree with you when the awakening comes. I'm going to stay and see it through. But no more thinking from now on!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It seemed to Pícaro in those days that he could scarcely take up a newspaper without seeing his brother's name on the first page. One day it would be: "Yesterday morning, in the region of Dompierre, the Sub-lieutenant Langhorne engaged two enemy machines. One fell in flames." And another day he would read: "On Friday afternoon the Lieutenants Langhorne and Hérault attacked a strong enemy patrol above Douaumont. One German single-seater was forced down intact in our lines, and as the rest retreated toward Étain, another machine was seen to fall out of control."

The press at home made much of Blaise, and Pícaro soon became aware that he was the brother of a celebrity. Correspondents came to him for details of the pilot's life, of his boyhood, of his family, and though Pícaro felt an inner distaste for this unsought publicity, he thought of his father, and answered their questions courteously. He even subscribed to half a dozen Paris dailies, which furnished him with an occasional envelope of clippings to be forwarded to Rita. The brothers met frequently, for, like other fighting pilots, Blaise seemed to spend nearly as much time on the boulevards as at the front. There were missions to examine new types of machines under test at St. Cyr; there were worn-out planes to fly in from the front, and new ones to be fetched from the great depot at Le Bourget. And these errands led through Paris, where the authorities winked a wise eye and asked no questions concerning a few hours' delay.

It was August, and Blaise was in town for ten days' leave. An old friend, who had not seen him since the days before he left the ranch, might have been shocked at the change wrought by two years of war. There were gray hairs at his temples, and his face was hollow beneath the cheekbones—thin and bloodlessly pale. His nostrils looked pinched; his mouth had lost its old delicacy and hardened to a thin, straight line. Only the eyes were the same, the dark eyes flecked with gold—luminous in their far-off gaze.

He was strolling along the Rue de Rivoli, at a place where the arcade was set with jewelers' shops; now and then he stopped to glance for a moment at the trinkets on display. He had a mind to pick up a ring or a bracelet for Annette, but his head ached this morning and it seemed difficult to choose. The Latin in Blaise clung to a certain moderation, but last night had proved more than he had bargained for. That dinner with Píc and Foster—eleven cocktails before they had gone to the restaurant! Damn the champagne! Still wine didn't give one this kind of a head. Why hadn't he had sense enough to go home,

instead of keeping his late rendezvous with Hérault? Hérault went too far with his eccentricities. Blaise's breath was cold in his nostrils, and the sweetish, acrid taste in his throat gave him little shudders of disgust.

He turned into a small shop where a woman in black welcomed him with a professional smile. "That ring in the window," he explained; "the one with the three pearls—may I look at it, madame?" She laid it on a bit of velvet and he bent over the showcase to examine it with eyes that seemed to have difficulty in focussing on an object so close at hand. Blaise had a surprising knowledge of such things.

"What's the price?" he asked.

She glanced at the diminutive tag, marked with symbols that looked like the last three letters of the alphabet. "Twenty-five hundred francs," she said, with her agreeable smile. "The setting is platinum, and the pearls, though not large, are perfect, as monsieur perceives."

Blaise shook his head. "Too dear," he declared. "No doubt you have not observed that the middle pearl has been peeled and that the setting hides a flaw of the skin. But the ring pleases me; I'll give you two thousand, if you wish."

The woman's eyebrows went up; she looked closely at the ring. "Perhaps monsieur is right," she said, still smiling. "One moment—I'll call my husband. . . . Leon!"

A man in a baize coat came from the back of the shop. He wore a close-clipped gray beard, and he was removing the watchmaker's glass from his eye. The woman explained to him rapidly; he glanced up at Blaise and nodded before he spoke.

"Very well, *mon lieutenant*," he said in the manner of an old soldier in the ranks; "two thousand if you wish."

Blaise drew from his pocket a cheque book and a woman's ring set with a single sapphire. "Cut it down to this size," he ordered. "You'll have it ready to-morrow, eh? I'll write you a cheque now."

He began to cough as he laid down the pen—a spasm of coughing that racked his chest and brought the color to his cheeks. The woman hastened to bring him a chair, to fetch a glass of water. The urbane smile was gone, there was pity in her eyes. Finally the coughing ceased. When he was gone, she turned to her husband.

"*Pauvre garçon!*" she said. "*C'est un poitrinaire!*"

"Do you know who he is?" observed the jeweler, readjusting the glass to his eye. "Does the name on his cheque tell you nothing? This young man who coughs is the Lieutenant Langhorne—the American aviator who shoots down so many German planes that one can't keep track of them! He may be *poitrinaire*, poor chap, but at least his chest is well protected! Name of a name! Nine palms in a row, and our poor Popaul so proud of his single star!"

“It must be terrible, that flying!” said his wife. “Did you smell the ether? Perhaps he’s just out of hospital.”

The jeweler smiled as he turned away to go back to his work. He prided himself on being a man of the world. “Hospital!” he remarked. “Really, my dear, for a Parisian you are curiously innocent!”

Blaise had gone downtown to fetch the ring, and now he was walking back to Passy, following a path that led under the trees bordering the Seine. Annette would be pleased with the gift, he felt, and he had reasons for wishing her to be pleased. He smiled to himself at a sudden odd train of thought. He had paid two thousand francs. That meant a German life and the destruction of a plane —property which represented the savings of a small shopkeeper or a superior clerk. A fantastic affair, this war!

A taxi overtook him and drew up beside the curb. The door opened and a girl stepped out. He saluted her with a smile, paid the chauffeur, and offered the girl his arm.

“I thought you were at home,” he said.

Annette Corlay was twenty-six; she looked eighteen. Her thick yellow hair was coiled about her head under a smart little hat; her eyes, shaded by black lashes, were dark blue and sparkling with intelligence; her face was vivid as the face of a child. As Orsay had once remarked, Annette was neither old nor hideous.

Blaise reached into his pocket and handed the girl a small satin-lined box. “I thought you’d like this,” he explained.

Annette’s expression scarcely changed as she glanced at the ring. “I like the pearls,” she said, coolly; “they’re pretty, but pearls don’t go with platinum. I think I’ll have them reset in a gold ring.”

Blaise took the trinket from her and turned it over in his hand. It was absurd, but he felt himself irritated by the pretensions of this *mannequin*. These moods of unreasoning petulance were frequent nowadays.

“You don’t like it?” he asked in a voice so indifferent that the girl did not raise her eyes.

“I like the pearls,” she said, reaching for the ring; “not the setting. You don’t understand these things!”

“*Eh bien*—if you don’t like it, so much the worse!”

Annette stifled a little cry as he flipped the ring into the Seine.

They walked on in silence, and presently she glanced up at him under the brim of her hat. Something perverse in her nature responded to Blaise’s petulance—to his gesture of throwing away the ring. Other men had spoiled her and she was tired of being spoiled. They said no more till they were in the apartment Blaise had taken two months before.

He stretched himself on a lounge; he felt done up by the walk—the least exertion seemed to weary him nowadays. The girl took off her hat and stood by the window, humming a little *Breton* song. At last Blaise's rapid breathing slowed and he lit a cigarette.

"Annette," he said, as though nothing had happened, "come and sit by me. I've something to tell you." She walked across the room obediently and sank down on the rug beside the lounge.

"My brother and Monsieur Foster," he went on, slowly, "have asked us to dine to-night. You know who Foster is?"

"Yes."

"Good! Now listen carefully. Monsieur Foster is tired of manufacturing small shells; the price has become so low that there's no longer anything in it for him. The government is about to place a large order for hundred-fifty-fives. That order will go where our friend Hérault desires it to go. Your task is to find out from Foster how much it is worth to his company to have this order placed with them. Ten per cent is customary in these affairs, I believe. There will be no need of any statement in writing; Foster's a man of his word. The commission should be paid to you on the day that the contract with the government is signed. It will be divided into four equal parts: one for you, one for Hérault, one for me, and one for a man whose name is no concern of ours. And believe me, my dear, your share will more than make up for any inconvenience to which you may put yourself!"

Annette's blue eyes were sparkling. This was an affair to her taste. Blaise smiled, drew her to him, and kissed her with amusement in his eyes. "I'll back you to get the better of this manufacturer!" he said.

"*Tu parles!*" she answered with a little laugh. "Watch me to-night!"

Pícaro was sitting at a table in the Posada Bar. The room was long and low, with a carved ceiling of oak. Waiters in Spanish costume moved to and fro among the tables, and behind the elaborate bar which reached nearly across one end of the room four men in white drew from the great carved casks the wines of Portugal and Spain. The place had its own customs, its own clientele. One did not order dry sherry or white port; one asked for number seventeen or number twenty-two. It was five o'clock and the long room was beginning to fill.

A waiter set down before Pícaro a glass of the pale dry sherry which was the Posada's specialty. It had been a hard day at the factory, and Langhorne raised the wine eagerly to his lips, expectant of the tingle which would soon run through his blood and bring an agreeable numbness to his mind. He set down the glass and made a sign to the man. "The same," he said, with a smile; "I'm tired to-night, François!"

The blond Swiss, in his caricature of a bull-fighter's dress, smiled sympathetically. "Monsieur works too hard," he ventured. "Another glass of the seventeen?"

Five months had passed since Pícaro's talk with Orsay on the evening of d'Urville's funeral. Orsay was gone out of his life—gone with Tara to the ends of the earth. "No more thinking," Pícaro had told his friend, and he had kept his word. If Blaise chose to betray Rita's love, to frequent fast women and men of Hérault's kind—so much the worse for Blaise! Pícaro had hardened his heart against thoughts of home, of friends, of the war itself. Rather late in life he had discovered the qualities of alcohol, and with its aid he settled into a routine which enabled him to do his work in peace. He saw little of Pfeil nowadays; more than once of late he had caught the elder man looking at him in a way that made him uneasy. But the L-O was paying formidable dividends, and after all, if he chose to amuse himself, it was no one's business but his own! He still lived in the modest apartment by the Neuilly Gate, where old Antoinette, deserted by her Monsieur Gaby, sighed over the American whose evenings were no longer spent at home. Black coffee cleared his head for the morning's work; vermouth before lunch and brandy afterward enabled him to get through the afternoon. He left the factory at four, drove home to bathe and change, and had his Spanish chauffeur drop him at the Posada, where the drinking of the evening began. Foster dropped in nearly every night with an escort of women and young British officers. When the time came the group about the long table split up into twos and threes, who wandered off to dine. Sometimes Pícaro and Bradley dined alone; sometimes they joined a party of revelers at dinner and went on afterward, half reluctantly, to sit through the stale performance at a music hall. There were nights when the Spanish chauffeur yawned outside the discreet entrance of a dancing club, where a bottle of inferior champagne was sold for a hundred francs; on other nights the man was dismissed early; and Pícaro boarded the last train of the Metro—flushed, unsteady, and a little thick of utterance as he demanded a first-class ticket at the *guichet*.

"Hello, Píc! . . . The same for me, François."

The waiter pulled out a chair and Bradley Foster sat down beside his friend. "I've been in Bourges," he said, wearily, as he cut the end of an expensive cigar. "I don't know what we're going to do unless we can land an order for bigger stuff! The government has cut the price of seventy-fives again. We didn't make a damn cent on our last contract!" He folded his arms and sat puffing moodily at his cigar.

Pícaro glanced at the heavy profile of the other man—it was extraordinary how Bradley was aging. He looked forty, yet he could be no more than thirty or thirty-one. The mouth which had once been sensitive had set and hardened;

the chin, shaved blue, seemed to have grown squarer, harder, more aggressive; the cheeks had a purplish tinge, and in certain lights displayed unpleasant veins. His crisp black hair was shot with gray; he had grown heavy about the waist, and his collar seemed too small for the bulging neck it confined.

An officer at the next table was questioning his companion in a low voice: "Who's that with the little Corlay? He has his share of medals, *ce-type-là*! Langlois was right—her arms are the most beautiful in Paris." And a woman's voice replied, a little sharply. "You find her attractive? She has nothing but her arms to recommend her, that *mannequin*! The man is Langhorne, the American ace—*un charmant garçon*!" Pícaro looked up.

Blaise was leading Annette toward the table where his brother sat. She was dressed daringly in black, and her shoulders were covered by a wrap of black gauzy material spangled with bits of silver like the scales of a fish. Her skin, innocent of paint, was smooth and blooming as an apricot; the other women in the room looked suddenly jaded and old.

Foster was leaning forward and staring almost rudely. "God! What a peach!" he muttered; "I wonder where Blaise picked her up!"

It was nearly midnight when they knocked at the door of a dancing club near the Étoile. The door opened a few inches and a woman's face peered out at them. Faint sounds of music came from the upper regions of the house.

"You know me, Suzanne," said Foster in a voice unnecessarily loud. "Hurry up! Let us in."

She shot the bolts behind them and hesitated for a moment at the foot of the stairs. "Let me give you a bottle of wine in the dining room," she suggested. "There's a noisy crowd upstairs—they'll have the police here if they keep this up!"

"But we want to dance," Foster put in, with drunken obstinacy. "That's what we came here for!"

The woman shrugged her shoulders and stepped aside.

The proprietress met them at the head of the stairs. Foster was an old client, and in these days when the cafés closed early the Belgian woman was making a fortune out of men of this kind. She seemed agitated; Pícaro fancied that her handsome gray wig was a little askew.

"Ah, messieurs," she said in a rapid whisper, "I'm distracted to-night! Listen to that noise. One would think that this were not a respectable house! Promise me that you'll be quiet, *hein*? God knows the police are severe!"

She opened a door. They heard confused sounds of music and shuffling feet; found themselves in a room where a dozen couples pranced and revolved unsteadily under clouds of cigarette smoke. A fair-haired Englishman was at the piano—a subaltern in the uniform of a famous regiment. A half-emptied

glass stood on a chair beside him. He played as though he were alone in the room, gazing off dreamily as his fingers flew over the keys. Foster ordered champagne and went to claim a dance with a girl he recognized; Pícaro seated himself with Blaise and Annette at a little table in one corner of the room. A young officer of *chasseurs*, who seemed to have taken more than was good for him, bowed to Annette, asking for a dance with a hint of mockery in his voice. She shook her head coldly, and whispered to Blaise, "Take me home if he bothers me again!"

The music stopped. Voices clamored for more wine. The professional pianist, a dapper little Spaniard with mustaches waxed to needle points, was bowing to the Englishman, but the officer motioned him away. He reached absently for his glass, drank the wine that remained, and began to play, still gazing off dreamily, with his head thrown back. The talking and the laughter ceased. Blaise was leaning forward with his chin in his hands and head turned a little to one side. The music was half familiar to Pícaro. What was it—Chopin? The drunken officer was trying to speak to Annette again. Damn the fellow! Couldn't he wait till this was over! Blaise was growing annoyed. Suddenly he rose from his chair.

"*Mon capitaine*," he said, coldly, in a voice low but clearly audible, "permit me to point out to you that this lady is under my escort."

The officer flushed; he was far gone in wine. "Lady!" he exclaimed, with a short laugh. "That little *grue*! I kicked her out a year ago!"

Blaise's face turned white. He seized a bottle from the table and brought it down crashing on the captain's head. Pícaro sprang to his feet; women shrieked; the music died away.

A French officer was bending over the prostrate *chasseur*. His face was grave as he straightened and turned to Blaise. "This is serious," he remarked, holding out a card. "If necessary you may call on me as a witness—I heard what Langlois said. He's a good chap, but a fool when he drinks."

"Gentlemen," said Pícaro, "if you permit, I'll assume responsibility for this affair. Lieutenant Langhorne is my brother. I suggest that you go home now, leaving me to look after the wounded man. I'll take him direct to the hospital. There's a car waiting for me at the Étoile."

The proprietress displayed an unexpected presence of mind. While she bathed Langlois's head and felt the faint beating of his heart, Pícaro took Blaise aside.

"There's only one thing to do," he said in a low voice: "Get out of Paris, get back to your squadron at once! Leave this to me. I'll do what I can to keep you out of it. Go now, sleep at a hotel, and take the first train in the morning."

Blaise nodded, took his brother's hand, and left the room.

The others were gone; only Foster and Annette remained—speaking in

whispers by the door. The girl gripped his arm, with terror in her eyes. The stage lost an actress in Annette Corlay.

"Oh—I'm so frightened!" she whispered, gazing up with dark-blue eyes clear as a child's. "You'll take me home, won't you?"

Three days had passed. Pícaro sat on the bench in Pfeil's office, facing the lawyer in his creaky chair. Both men looked worn and anxious.

"It's fortunate," Pfeil was saying, "that I know the Maître Langlois, but God preserve me from another such interview! It's not a pleasant story to tell a father. He's agreed to take no steps, provided his son lives; the people at the hospital seem to have swallowed the story of the accident." He passed his hand over his bald head, jerked himself to his feet, and began to walk back and forth, with steps at once rapid and hesitating.

"These damned dancing clubs!" he went on, vehemently. "I'd like to close the lot of them! Any man might have done what your brother did, but what's the sense of quarreling over a woman like Annette Corlay! Well, the affair may blow over. Langlois's skull is fractured, but they say at the hospital that his chances of recovery are good."

A clerk was knocking at the door of frosted glass which gave on the outer offices. Pfeil turned the key and confronted the man, who held out an envelope. "For Monsieur Langhorne," he said; "his chauffeur has just brought it from Neuilly."

Pícaro tore it open, glanced at the contents, and handed it to Pfeil. It was a note from Hérault, brought in by courier from the front.

"Mon Cher Langhorne," the lawyer read: "Bad news. Late yesterday afternoon your brother and I met a singularly aggressive German patrol. I got a ball through my left arm at the first encounter, and had to make for our lines. Blaise shot down three *Boches* (all of them officially confirmed this morning!) before he was surprised by the fourth, who put two bullets through his stomach while he was clearing a jammed gun. He came down behind our first-line trenches, and both legs were broken in the crash. The doctor says he may live."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Blaise was still on his back when Langlois rejoined his battalion. For many weeks Pícaro drove to the hospital, hoping only that his brother might have survived another day. But gradually his condition improved. The flesh was tough, the bones knit well, and the quiet months filled out his cheeks and brought relief to the chest once racked by coughing. In the spring, when his country declared war, Blaise was able to limp about the boulevards.

One summer morning a pair of American officers were sitting on the terrace at Rochet's. It was the hour when the men of Paris assemble for a glass of vermouth before lunch. The café was filling; it was pleasant on the terrace shaded by the fresh foliage of lindens—an agreeable place to sip one's drink and pass the time of day with a friend. A stream of motor-cars passed along the Champs-Elysées—chugging taxis, cars of the American Ambulance, and gray limousines bearing the stars of generals.

A long, low car with a body of varnished mahogany drew up before the terrace. A young officer was at the wheel. A civilian sat by his side and another civilian was with a woman in the tonneau. They stepped out to the sidewalk and strolled across to a table on the terrace. The Americans glanced up.

"Who's the Frenchman with all the medals?" the young captain asked.

His companion, who wore the insignia of a major in the Signal Corps, was an old resident of Paris, newly commissioned to help his government in the purchase of supplies. He smiled.

"Your Frenchman's an American," he explained. "He's Langhorne, and that's his brother beside him. The man with the girl is Foster, a director of the Franco-American Syndicate."

The captain was interested; he wore the silver wings of a pilot and he hoped to be at the front before long. "Gad!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't have missed this!"

"He's an extraordinary bird," said the major, seeing his friend's interest; "they say he's dying of T.B., but he flies nearly every day. He was pretty well shot to pieces last year, that day he knocked down three *Boches*. . . . Seven months in hospital. They wanted to invalid him out and send him home. But he's a friend of old Pfeil—you've heard of Fernand Pfeil, the lawyer?—so the wires were pulled and, since the doctors said he wasn't fit for the front, they gave him permission to live in Paris, keep a machine at Le Bourget, and fly whenever he felt up to it. This is an incredible war!"

The major nodded to his companion as he raised his glass. He had an eye for the picturesque and he prided himself on his knowledge of the Parisian world. “His brother,” he went on, “the blond civilian beckoning to the waiter, has made a good thing out of the war. He’s the inventor of the L-O Motor. He and Pfeil, and a man named Orsay, who used to be a designer with Ronsard Frères, formed the original company. None of that stock’s for sale! They still make motors—the best L-O’s that are turned out—but that’s only a small part of their business nowadays. When the government adopted their motor for the new single-seaters, Pfeil organized a group of automobile manufacturers. The Ronsards are in it; Loriot, Verdier, the Motte-Prony people, Mallet, and Forbin-Deslandes. Now, if you want to buy motors, you must go to the group. I know because our government is placing an order. We’re to pay the group twenty-two thousand francs each, and it’s no secret that out of this they pay a royalty of three thousand to Langhorne and his two friends. Not bad, eh?”

The waiter brought a cloth and began to set the table; the little group on the terrace was stopping for lunch. Foster was talking rather loudly of business matters, of a new contract for shells—a subject uninteresting to Pícaro. He glanced at Blaise, feeling a curious little shock of pity at sight of his brother’s haggard face. Blaise drank sparingly and scarcely tasted the food set before him. He seemed weary and thoughtful, making no pretense of listening to Foster’s talk. Annette stole a glance at her old lover. In the eyes of Paris she had been Foster’s mistress for many months, but whatever of warmth her nature possessed belonged to Blaise. Even now a word from him would have brought her to his side. He shook his head as the waiter offered him a filet of sole; looked up and caught his brother’s eye.

“Excuse me, Píc,” he said in a low voice. “I don’t feel hungry to-day. I think I’ll take a little run out to Le Bourget.” He nodded his apologies to the others as he rose. The man brought his stick and *képi*. Next moment Blaise’s conspicuous car was flashing through the traffic of the Champs-Elysées. Foster’s eyes followed him till he disappeared.

“He won’t last six months at this rate,” he remarked, turning to Pícaro with a slow shake of the head. “Look at him—going off to fly without even a bite of lunch! They tell me there’s not a pilot at the front who puts in more hours in the air! The Germans will never get him—but the T.B.’s will if you don’t get him out of the war pretty soon!”

Pícaro sighed.

“It’s no use, Brad,” he declared; “I’ve done my best.”

Annette had been eating greedily, in her manner of a Breton peasant’s daughter, but she stopped as Pícaro spoke and he had a fancy that her eyes were full of tears.

Pícaro was tired that day and he had resolved to take the afternoon off. It was pleasant at Rochet's, on the shady terrace. They lingered over their lunch, over their coffee, over the liqueurs that followed. Annette was silent, answering in monosyllables when Foster spoke to her. The two men fell into a mood of memories—they talked of the far-off days in Boston when they were fitting themselves for the lives that lay ahead. As their thoughts wandered into the past, scene after scene reconstructed itself: the strain and flurry of half-forgotten examinations; the droning voice of old Professor Simpkins, lecturing on mechanics; evenings of talk in Foster's shabby room. At last Foster glanced at his watch.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed; "it's after two! And I had an appointment at half past one!" He turned and caught the waiter's eye. "The bill, if you please! Well, Píc, it's fun to think of the old times, eh? I wish we could live 'em over again. . . . Hello! Here comes Blaise!"

The car came to a stop with a noise of grinding brakes. Blaise limped across the sidewalk and seated himself in the chair he had left vacant a little more than two hours before. He lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke with an air of content. His depression seemed gone; his eyes sparkled and there was a faint flush in his cheeks.

"Hey, Charlot!" he called to the man, an old friend, "is it too late for something to eat? No? Order me some scrambled eggs, then, and some kidneys, broiled—you know the way I like them. And first of all bring me a double brandy and a glass of milk."

He turned to his friends. "I had some sport!" he exclaimed. "You should have been along! I've had my eye on a *Boche* two-seater that's been coming over from a field behind Laon. It's a photographic outfit and it's been on the job every clear day for a month. He was a high flier; our fellows could never climb up to him in time. I had a hunch to-day . . . took all the altitude I needed and lay in wait in the sun. Those Germans do everything on schedule. Sure enough, on the tick of one o'clock there was my fat *Boche*! He never knew what hit him; went down in flames and crashed near a little place called Fauconcourt."

Blaise tossed away his cigarette and began to stir brandy into a tall glass of milk. Pícaro was studying the flushed, haggard face of his brother. Only a short time before, Blaise had been sipping a vermouth at the same place. Now he was back, to continue, with a better appetite, the interrupted meal. It was incredible, fantastic, unreal. . . .

Summer gave way to the chill autumn which ushered in the coldest winter of the war, and October brought Pícaro a letter with an outlandish stamp—a letter from Orsay.

First of all [he read, in his friend's clear and minute hand] I want you to know that I am happy, really happy, with Tara. In my eyes she is one out of a thousand—a woman who feels but never reflects. And I have reason to hope that she is happy with me. She loves her island with a passion curiously intense; neither of us, I fancy, will ever see Europe again.

Picture to yourself a circular mass of mountains, green and serrated, rising abruptly from a warm blue sea. The peaks are higher than the Vosges, and their flanks are cleft by valleys where cool streams murmur through tunnels of vegetation, filled with soft greenish light. The mouth of each valley has its village—a cluster of thatched huts walled with bamboo. The circle is perhaps fifty kilometers around, and a coral reef, so far offshore that the thunder of the breakers comes to one as a kind of whispering undertone, protects the surrounding lagoon. It is very beautiful, very peaceful; and I know now that I shall be content to live here all my days.

"What does he do? How does he pass the time?" you are asking yourself. Well, I will tell you. Since bedtime is at eight, one is awake before dawn. I look at the sky and decide whether or not the day will prove a good one. I am Frenchman enough to love my *basse cour*, so I spend half an hour with my fowls and ducks. It would surprise you to know the intricacies which are part of a peasant's life! The ducklings need their little promenade, their little swim, but if one is not constantly alert, the drakes and the roosters make short work of them. Then Tara, flushed with sleep, runs out barefoot to tell me that my coffee is waiting and will soon be cold. In reality, there are a thousand things to do each day. Pfeil has infected me with his love of gardening. I brought seeds and plants of many kinds, and what began as a hobby is developing into a formidable task. Then I am growing lettuce, cress, tomatoes, and other vegetables; I am building a house, planting a lawn, and having a whaleboat built, in which to install a small engine of Captain d'Urville's.

Make no mistake—I am a busy man, and happy as only a busy man can be! Have you ever known the joy of waking before sunrise, so filled with pleasant anticipation of the coming day that it was impossible to lie in bed? When you were a child, perhaps, but not often in after life!

You would like our people—brown, good-natured men with soft voices and the muscles of giants. Who are they? Whence did they come, to people this forgotten bit of land? They are agreeable savages, at any rate, and I am becoming nearly as primitive as they.

But I find that one cannot be a savage consistently. Now you are going to smile! I am building the new house on a bit of high land close to the beach. Half a mile up the valley there is a superb waterfall, and suddenly, one day, I thought to myself: “Ha! Why not? A small hydroelectric plant would provide us with lights and an ice machine!” So a few months later, when a schooner touched here to pick up the year’s copra, I sent off a letter to my agent in Sydney, ordering what I shall need to set up my plant. Civilization is a curse, but we are inextricably bound up in it, all the same!

Poor civilization! You and I have played our little parts in making it more intricate, more difficult for those who will follow us, and at this distance I feel a certain tenderness toward the complexities I have left behind for good. What will this war do to it, I wonder? It was not easy to leave it all—you, my other friends, and France, my foster-mother; but I will neither kill men nor continue to build the apparatus used for killing them. You understand, and I think Pfeil does; the rest do not matter.

How is Pfeil? Please give him my respects and Tara’s love. And old Antoinette—I often think of her! The war cannot last for ever—sooner or later you will be going home. When that day comes I want you to do something for me. I have written my bankers to hold in trust for Antoinette a sum sufficient to make her comfortable for the rest of her days. See them before you leave France, and if she desires, arrange a lease of the apartment for her. She likes the quarter, I know.

While I am looking ahead into a future less certain than one likes to think, let me try to persuade you to pay us a visit after the war. You know how to get here—the last five hundred miles is the only difficult portion of the trip. And that is not over-difficult, for there are always schooners to be chartered. Permit me to hope that some morning, before too many years have passed, I shall wake up to see a schooner in the offing—see her steal in through the pass in the early calm, and see you spring over the rail to come ashore in the first boat!

It is odd to think that you and I are almost as far apart as two men can be, without leaving our earth for a voyage into interstellar space! But you are often in my thoughts, and I can wish you no greater happiness than to find the peace that I have found.

It was late afternoon; the bright autumn day was drawing to a close. Pícaro had been called out to Le Bourget, the aviation depot, on a technical errand,

and now an officer was showing him through the hangars filled with new planes awaiting their turns at the front. In the lee of a small hangar, a little apart from the others, he saw a familiar car—long and low, with a boat-like body of bright mahogany. He stopped.

"My brother must be here," he said to the lieutenant. "Ah! here's Callot!"

The *méchanicien* was saluting, but to-day there was no grin on his dark gamin's face. "Lieutenant Langhorne took off an hour ago," he said; "he ought to be back before long."

"You'll excuse me, monsieur," the officer remarked to Pícaro. "I must hurry back before the bureau closes. Perhaps you'd like to wait for your brother." He gave Callot a friendly nod, saluted the American, and turned away.

The mechanic glanced up eagerly. "I've been wanting to talk with you, sir," he said in rapid French, with the throaty accent of a Parisian. "Perhaps he will listen to you! I can say nothing. Who am I to give him advice! Your brother is dying. I've been with him since his first day at the front—and I know! If he continues to fly, he'll faint in the air some day, and that will be the end! Can't you speak to him, sir? Can't you make him see the truth? They'd invalid him out to-morrow if he gave the word. Another week, another day, perhaps, will finish him! You must know that he is *poitrinaire*; his cough was better after those months in hospital, but now it is frightful . . . sometimes there's blood on the handkerchief he takes care to hide! Persuade him . . . use any means to get him to accept a discharge! He's been a kind boss to me, and he's done his bit, the good God knows!" There was emotion in the eager gaze of Callot's eyes.

Pícaro did not reply at once, but turned to look off across the great level flying field. The man's words startled him, made him realize what had escaped him through days of work and nights of empty pleasure. Perhaps Callot was right, but what was to be done? Well, he would try, in any case. He sighed.

"Many thanks," he said. "I'm afraid you're right. I'll see what I can do."

The sun had set and the chill of evening was in the air. A few rooks, homeward bound to their roosting places, trailed across a sky devoid of clouds and luminous with the mournful light of an autumn evening in France. The shadows were gathering about the earth; the hangars on the far side of the field were losing form and outline. Callot touched Pícaro's arm and pointed off to the northeast.

"There he is!"

Langhorne heard a faint, resonant hum, and, gazing intently into the fading sky, he made out something like a wisp of lace approaching, growing larger, assuming the form of a small airplane. High above the field it turned into the wind, and the sound of its motor gave place to the whistle of rushing wings. It

descended in long, gentle curves, sped low over the withered grass, touched, bounded, touched, and came to a jarring stop a hundred yards from where they stood. But the motor did not give tongue and the pilot did not clamber stiffly down to welcome Callot, already sprinting across the field.

Pícaro found himself running—instinct told him that something had gone wrong. Callot was astride of the fuselage, bending over the cockpit as he fumbled at the catch of Blaise's belt.

"He's fainted," he said, shortly, as Pícaro trotted up to the machine. "Give me a hand to get him to the hangar, and then I'll run for the *toubib*."

Between them they dragged Blaise from his seat and carried his limp body across the field. His face was white, but Pícaro noticed that there was no blood on his flying clothes. They laid him on a cot, covered with a coarse gray blanket; when Callot was gone Langhorne poured brandy down his brother's throat, from a flask the mechanic had forced into his hand. Presently Blaise shivered and raised his head to look about him in bewilderment.

"Hello, Píc!" he exclaimed, weakly. "What are you doing here? What the devil? I must have passed out just as my wheels touched the ground!"

"You're not wounded?"

"Hell, no! I've had these fainting fits two or three times lately. I don't know what's the matter."

Pícaro turned at the sound of rapid steps.

"*Eh bien, messieurs!* What's this little excitement?" It was a *médecin-major* who spoke, with a manner of exaggerated cheerfulness. He bent over Blaise, unbuttoning his clothes with practiced hands.

Pfeil was pacing the floor of his shabby office, hands clasped behind him and head jerking oddly in time to his deliberate steps. His familiar, the inconspicuous Achille, stood by the door.

"War," the lawyer was observing, philosophically, "causes a curious state of affairs, my dear Achille; its turmoil is apt to bring to the top what would be the dregs in time of peace! Consider Hérault, the worst type of fashionable decadent—with his manner of a courtier and his morals of an Apache. And I fear that Monsieur Langhorne's brother is not much better! Yet these two young men possess the finest military qualities. . . . If it hadn't been for that Langlois affair, I would have seen that Lieutenant Langhorne was proposed for the Rosette!" Pfeil halted suddenly as his ear caught the sound of a familiar footstep on the stair.

"Come in!" he called before Pícaro had time to knock. Achille bowed to Pfeil and the newcomer, picked up his hat, and slipped out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. Pfeil took Pícaro's hand before he crossed the room to fetch an open box of cigars.

"Everything is arranged," he said as he struck a match. "I went to the Ministry this morning and they were in entire accord with our views. He is to be discharged whether he wishes it or not. The general spoke of a final citation, and you may be sure that it will be of a kind to cause you and his father pride. He has rendered services that France will not soon forget! But remember one thing: the doctors tell me that unless he follows their instructions to the dot he has only a few more months of life! If he looks after himself seriously, on the other hand, a cure is not impossible. He must never fly again; he must take a month of rest and quiet in the Riviera before he goes home; and once at home, he must devote himself to his diet, his sleep, his fresh air and sun. How is he to-day?"

"Better, I think."

"Good! You can tell him what I've said. The papers will take a few days to go through."

Pícaro rose from the bench. His face looked worn in the gray light of the winter afternoon, but his smile was very grateful as he held out his hand.

"You're a real friend," he said, a little shyly, in a low voice; "you do me nothing but good turns. . . . Whenever I'm in trouble I come to you!"

Pfeil jerked himself upright with an air of embarrassment. "*Allons*, my boy!" he remarked. "It's a pleasure. For whom should I do good turns if not for you!"

A letter from home reached Pícaro in the spring—the spring made memorable by the attacks which marked the last effort of the Central Powers. In the midst of those anxious and fateful days, Rita's letter carried Pícaro's thoughts far off to another world, to the peaceful valley of the Guadalupe, where cattle filed down to drink and wandered back to the green hills carpeted with *alfilería*—where the only sound was the soft thunder of the Pacific, where no guns muttered by day and flashed along the horizon by night.

> Blaise is here [Rita du Quesne began]. I've been too happy and too flustered to write until to-day! There's so much to tell you that I hardly know where to begin. We got your cable, sent on the day he sailed, and he wired us from New York. You can imagine how we've been dashing about, nearly hysterical with joy. Concha worked off her excitement in a house-cleaning that turned the place upside down for a week; Domingo spent the time grooming a beautiful four-year-old for Blaise's use; the major put in hours in Blaise's room, which he's had replastered and arranged just as it used to be.
>
> At last the day of his arrival dawned. We drove to town in the

new car—the one you ordered for father. He's very fond of going about in it, and the Young Julius has learned to drive quite well. They told us at the station that the train was reported on time, so we went to Pierre's and the major ordered a tremendous lunch—all the things Blaise used to like. Then, an hour ahead of time, we went back to the station to wait. I'll never forget that hour: how we paced back and forth in the dismal waiting room, how at last the porters began to gather by the tracks, how my heart beat when the engine whistled far down the line. Then the train came rumbling in and stopped, covered with desert dust. Doors opened, porters jumped out with their little stools, tired-looking passengers began to stream out of the cars. For a moment there was no sign of Blaise. Suddenly I shouted, "There he is!" Blaise was standing by a pile of luggage not far off, very pale and handsome in his uniform, glancing at the people passing in and out of the doors. Oh, Píc! It was good to see him!

Well, I mustn't inflict my feelings on you. My principal work has been to act as a kind of buffer between him and the world. I didn't realize how famous he had become. Newspaper men come here nearly every day, asking for interviews, for stories of flying, for his opinions on the wildest subjects. His friends travel fantastic distances to see him, to shake his hand. But he must have quiet; Bob agrees with the French doctors that he can be cured by a course of rest and fresh air and wholesome food.

I'd marry him to-morrow and spend the rest of my life taking care of him, but the major has put his foot down. We're not to think of marriage, he says, until Bob pronounces Blaise completely cured. He's right, of course, but it is hard to wait! I hope we'll have children some day and it wouldn't be fair to them to marry now.

I wish you could see the ranch this spring. It's been a good year, and I've never seen the Guadalupe more beautiful. The wild mustard will hide a man on horseback; the grass is like green velvet everywhere; the cattle are bursting fat.

I'm scribbling this in the kitchen, where I come every night to fix Blaise's soup for the next day. Concha could do it, of course, but I like to do it myself, and Bob explained to me just how to prepare his food. The main thing is to get him to eat. Concha is sitting by the lamp, working on a piece of weird embroidery. Do you remember her old white cat? I just heard his special hunting meow, and saw him slip in through the hole in the door, with a fat gopher in his mouth. He always brings them into the kitchen to eat and never

makes a spot. But the most fiendish crunching noises are coming from under the table!

Píc, you must come home when the war's over—come home to stay. We need you here; your absence is the one cloud on our sky. I must stop now. Good night, my dear.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Foster and Pícaro stood by the rail of a troop ship, steaming out of Brest. It was a raw gray afternoon, and the east wind, blowing off the land in gusts, drove in their faces a fine stinging rain. Foster's cap was pulled down over his forehead, his shoulders were hunched, and the collar of his heavy coat turned up about his ears. A group of soldiers passed along the deck—talking in subdued voices and glancing over their shoulders toward the land.

"They're glad the show's over," Foster remarked when they were out of earshot; "but I'll bet every one of those boys is thinking to himself, 'What's next?' And I'm in the same fix. We're men without jobs, without certain futures—all of us! Are you glad to be on the way home? Am I? To tell you the truth, I'm damned if I know! My wife doesn't care much for me; I have no children, nor any more friends at home than I've left in France. . . ."

Pícaro nodded. He was thinking of his farewells in Paris, of the pain of leaving the friendly soil in which he had taken root . . . of Pfeil, of Madame d'Urville, of good old Antoinette. He was more fortunate than Bradley, for he had a home awaiting him, and the thought of the major, of Rita, to shorten the long journey across sea and land. But Foster was right—they were at loose ends: young men with their lives behind them at an age when the future should have filled their thoughts.

"What are you going to do when you do get home?" Foster went on. "What am I going to do? Go back to the old grind? No, sir! I've done some thinking since the Armistice. I've raked together my little pile, and now, instead of working, I'm going to begin to live! I didn't have much fun when I was a kid; in fact I didn't have any real childhood at all. Clara and I used to be happy together, and, after all, she's my wife. I'm going to try to patch things up and take her away to travel and see the world and have a good time. No more of the kind of good times we had in Paris! There's nothing in that game!"

The transport steamed slowly through the Narrows and entered the Upper Bay. New York seemed to have declared a holiday to welcome the returning men. Whistles blared, airplanes droned overhead, gayly decorated tugs, their decks packed with men and women, steamed back and forth. One tug, flying a great banner inscribed: "*Welcome To Our Heroes!*" came close alongside, beneath where Pícaro stood. He saw the upturned faces of women, frantic with a kind of mob emotion. Soldiers lined the rails of the decks below, laughing, shouting, pretending to reach for hundreds of packages of chocolate and cigarettes, hurled up by the women's willing arms, only to fall far short. Pícaro

perceived a kind of symbolism in the sight of all these good things, showered upward to miss the hands stretched out for them—falling back to clutter the dirty waters of the bay. A gigantic sergeant, with foreign decorations on his tunic, sprang to the rail at Pícaro's side. His figure seemed to dominate the crowd below; he raised one hand to command attention, in a gesture carrying a hint of scorn.

"We don't want that junk!" he bellowed, in a voice audible a quarter of a mile away. "Got any *vin blanc* left?" The French words, as he pronounced them, rhymed with "thin rank."

Clara was waiting on the dock. She kissed her husband without warmth, and Pícaro fancied that there was distaste in the way she disengaged herself from Bradley's arms. Her tailored suit was not calculated to hide the imperfections of a figure becoming stout and lax; she wore eyeglasses rimmed with tortoise shell and attached by a broad black ribbon; her complexion had lost its freshness, and her thick honey-colored hair, arranged a little too elaborately, had a lifeless look.

"You won't mind," she was saying in a voice that grated on Pícaro's ears, "if I don't go uptown with you now? Drop me at the studio and then Smith can take you home. You're tired, I know—both of you. If you weren't, I'd ask you to come in. We're to have a wonderful privilege this afternoon, a few of my friends and I. Brihadratha, the Indian philosopher, is coming to the studio to give us a little talk!"

"Clara," Foster asked, "what time will this session end?" He gave Pícaro a sudden glance.

"By five, I think. Why?" She had not the wit to perceive the menace in his voice.

"Well, what do you say we all go to hear the old bird? We're not tired, and Píc and I could stand a bit of uplifting."

"Good! It'll be a chance to meet some of my new friends!" Mrs. Foster was doing her best on this day of her husband's homecoming, but there was no cordiality in her voice. Pícaro felt that there was trouble in the air. He wished ardently that he had made his escape in time, but Bradley's eyes had said: "Stand by. I need you!"

The studio was a large square room with a north light, at the top of an old building on Washington Square. Clara had decorated and furnished it with a kind of expensive eccentricity. The guests were mainly women of her own kind, barren and dull. There was a scattering of young men, curiously of a kind: all seemed to wear slightly soiled linen, horn-rimmed glasses, and longish hair; their lips were thick and their features of a Semitic cast. Brihadratha was an emaciated man with a sparse, venerable beard and deep-set

eyes. There was real dignity in his manner, and his flowing Eastern costume was picturesque. As he stood up before them, Pícaro noticed that he was straight as a boy.

The Indian philosophy proved to be no more than a rather trite tirade against Western civilization, against materialism as opposed to the life of the spirit. But the old man's voice was remarkable—soft, deep, and beautifully modulated. At last he finished, and took his leave a few moments later. There was nothing unctuous in his bow, nor in his smile; perhaps the old fellow really believed he had a message for America. Pícaro smiled to himself, thinking of the shower of cigarettes he had seen fall into the bay not many hours before. The fat young Russian Jew in the next chair turned to him.

"He's interesting, eh?" he remarked, with the faint condescension of a brand-new American. "I like what he says about machines mastering men in the end. We need more contemplation, more repose!" He made a sweeping gesture with a pudgy hand, not overclean. "But these Eastern people are individualists, and that's why they get nowhere. Capitalism has failed; the world needs something new. For myself, I turn my eyes to Russia; in that great experiment lies the hope of mankind!"

Pícaro glanced toward Foster. The man beside him repelled him with a strong physical disgust; he longed to make his escape to the street. Foster had risen and was speaking to his wife in a voice audible all over the room. "I'm going now," he said.

His wife's closed car was waiting by the curb, but Bradley ordered the man to put their bags into a passing taxicab. "To the Engineers' Club," he ordered the chauffeur. Inside the cab, he turned to Pícaro. "I'm through!" he remarked as he lit a cigar with fingers that trembled a little. "It's finished! Let me put you up at the club till you're ready to go West."

In the lounge of the Engineers' Club, while Foster summoned a waiter and wrote out his order for an elaborate meal, Pícaro had one of those curious moments which come to every man at times: a moment when the recurrence of a scene from the past wipes out the intervening years. And to make the illusion verge upon reality, he saw an elderly member, with gold-rimmed glasses and a drooping mustache, swing about with a startled look as Bradley rose and held out his hand, exclaiming, "Well, Mr. Livingstone!" The old member seized the outstretched hand, muttered something unintelligible, and dove out of sight through a pair of swinging doors. Pícaro grinned. It seemed scarcely possible that seven years had passed since the day when he had lunched here with his friend.

When dinner was over and they were smoking by a fire in a quiet room, Foster spoke of what was uppermost in his thoughts. He was lying in a deep

leather chair, with arms folded and an ankle on his knee.

"A hell of a homecoming, eh!" he remarked. "I was full of all sorts of good resolutions yesterday; now they're blown-up, finished! What's the use? You can see what kind of a woman Clara is; she doesn't care a damn for me! And those friends of hers—good God! A pack of greasy foreigners. They weren't even clean! Even the old Hindu made a quick get-away—he was too good for that crowd!"

"I'm sorry, Brad."

Foster was silent for a moment, gazing into the fire with unseeing eyes. He raised his head. "There's nothing else to do," he said slowly. "I'm going to let her divorce me. If she wants grounds, I'll give her all she needs. But I can't live alone. Píc, I'm going to cable for Annette!" He puffed at his cigar, blew out an eddying ring of smoke, and then asked, "When are you going West?"

"To-morrow afternoon."

"Then we'll lunch together. I'll be busy in the morning—got to have a look at an apartment some of us are building on the Drive. We started it before the war, but it's been hung up. Well, I'm tired. I think I'll turn in now." He chuckled harshly. "Do you know what I'm going to name the apartment?" he went on as he rose from his chair. "The Corlay Arms!"

They were within sight of the north line of the Guadalupe. The car moved at a sedate pace along the road Pícaro remembered so well—the long straight road that led south between the foothills and the dunes. Young Julius was driving; he seemed unchanged except that his woolly hair was shot with gray. Pícaro sat on the back seat, between his father and Rita. The young girl he remembered was a woman now. Her eyes and the bright ripples of her hair were still the same, but the slender body was more strongly knit, and suffering had stamped her face with dignity.

The sight of the major had given Pícaro a shock—he had not realized his father's age. Major Langhorne looked very old and very frail. His hand trembled, his shoulders were bowed, and his sight was almost gone. At the station he had taken Rita's arm and her gentle hands had helped him into the car. Pícaro had found it difficult to speak at first, and Rita had glanced away with moist bright eyes as she perceived a tear trickling down the old man's face.

"There's the ranch!" the major was exclaiming, tremulously, as his dim gaze made out the outlines of a familiar hill. "You'll soon be home! Ah, Henry, it's good to have my two boys back!"

It was a cloudless afternoon in spring. Beyond the dunes and the fringe of surf the ocean heaved lazily—a dark-blue plain, stretching away to meet the sky. The air was rich with the salt fragrance of the beaches. Meadow larks

fluttered from one fencepost to the next, and as the car dipped into a shallow valley, Pícaro heard the long sweet whistle of mating quail. The coastal hills were gay with wildflowers and carpeted with grass. This was home—there was no other country half so beautiful!

There was the old Balsa marsh—the knoll—the clump of gum trees where Julius used to tie the horses when the major went shooting. The trees were taller than they used to be. The car was turning inland, off the state road. Pícaro's nostrils quivered as he breathed in the perfume of the bottom land, the scent of cattle lying in the shade of cottonwoods and raising their heads as the car passed. Ah! there was the house! For a moment, before he remembered, he strained his eyes to make out his mother's figure standing on the gallery as she had done so often in the old days, watching for the first glimpse of her son, far down the road. . . .

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Fat Concha was waddling about the court, cutting flowers for the dinner-table. The afternoon was warm and still; there was no sound save the woman's heavy breathing and the snip of her shears, punctuating the hum of bees. Blaise had gone north, against Dr. Tisdale's advice, to spend a week in San Francisco; Rita had chosen this almost windless day for a sail with Pícaro; the Major, with Young Julius, was inspecting some work at the south end of the ranch.

Concha straightened her back at the sound of a limping step on the path. It was Domingo, a little grimmer, a little more gaunt than in the old days, but still a tough and wiry man. His lips relaxed in a smile as she turned to face him; this enormous woman, who might have weighed three hundred pounds, was still his sweetheart, his Conchita. He stood with the toe of one boot to the path, resting his weight on his sound leg. Mechanically, unconsciously, his fingers began to roll a cigarette. Concha gave him an answering smile and sank down on the worn bench among the roses. Domingo struck a match.

"The men are finished for the day," he said when he had exhaled an eddy of smoke. He limped to the bench and seated himself at Concha's side.

"I was lonely," she remarked. "The girls are at the river, and Miss Rita has gone off with Don Enrique for a sail."

"Ay!" Domingo sighed with a slow shake of the head. "If only it were Don Enrique, instead of his brother!" Concha's fat body quivered.

"The same thought is in every mind on the ranch," she said; "the old man understands us, but he cannot live many months more, and Don Blas will make an ill *patrón*, I fear. The war has changed him; he cares nothing for the Guadalupe now—a blind man could see that! He has no eye for the cattle, no desire to ride out with the men as in the old days. Think of that pretty *palomino*, broken and gaited for him with so much care. . . . Has he ordered him saddled once? Nowadays it is Don Enrique who seems to love the place. Not a day passes but he is in the saddle." Domingo sighed again.

"Don Enrique is his father's son," he declared.

"And consider Don Blas." There was indignation in old Concha's voice. "I have long since forgotten his affair with our poor daughter; one must forgive the sins of youth, and God be thanked, she died an honest woman in the eyes of the world. But when I see Miss Rita worn out with the task of nursing him, I tell thee there are times when it is not easy to hold my tongue!" Concha still possessed a pair of very handsome eyes, and now she turned them on her husband in a glance full of significance.

“Let him take care!” she went on in a lower voice. “Shall I tell thee a secret, my Domingo? Well, we women have keener eyes than men, and unless I am blind she is awakening to the truth. For years she has been enamored of a shadow; now she is beginning to love a man of flesh and blood!”

It was late and Pícaro lay smoking in his room, stretched in the old morris-chair. The square, high-ceilinged room was as he remembered it in the days of his boyhood; Rita had seen to that. The guns were on the rack above the head of the bed; the worn bearskin in its place; the pictures as they had been before his departure for France. The stuffed wildfowl still hung along the picture-rail, and the bighorn ram, his neck a little threadbare with the passage of years, still gazed down with yellow glassy eyes. The door was open, for the night was warm. There was a sound of shuffling footsteps on the gallery, and Blaise’s voice: “Still awake? May I come in?”

He was in pajamas and a dressing gown, and his feet were thrust into a pair of mules. He lit a cigarette and sank into a chair. With an ankle resting on his knee, Blaise began to move his foot nervously, so that the loose sole of the slipper tapped his heel.

“Hérault’s dead,” he said abruptly. “You remember him, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Someone sent me the clipping. . . . He shot himself in his apartment in Paris.”

Pícaro made no comment. He had never liked Hérault, and the suicide did not interest him. But the affair seemed to have touched Blaise’s imagination. “I’ve had one or two letters from him,” he went on after a short silence. “He was fed up . . . sometimes I feel that way myself.”

“But suicide,” said Pícaro, faintly irritated by the other’s words; “that’s a quitter’s way out!” Blaise shook his head.

“You’re wrong, Píc. Do you know what I think? Suicide’s our only gesture of freedom, of independence. A man can make up his mind to end his life, take a gun in his hand, and laugh at the whole damned Universe!” Pícaro smiled.

“That wouldn’t be much satisfaction to me,” he remarked.

“You never feel that way? Well, I do. I’m sick of it all. Paris, San Francisco, the ranch! I used to love the Guadalupe, but nowadays living here seems like being buried alive!”

“Cheer up, man—you’re almost cured! Father can’t last much longer; it’ll be up to you to carry on. You’ll be marrying soon.” Blaise shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said.

All through that summer, as his strength increased, Blaise grew more

silent, more depressed. Much of his time was spent away from the ranch. As for Pícaro, he seemed to have lost all interest in the world beyond the confines of the Guadalupe. He was working as hard as he had worked in France—working with an interest that made each new day a joy. He had the means now to make the improvements of which the major had dreamed for years:—new buildings, new fences, thoroughbred stock, and a small irrigation project to put the upper valley into lucerne. He avoided thoughts of the future, telling himself that he was working to give his father pleasure; and it was true that for all his age, the major was enjoying himself as he had not done since Doña Margarita's death. The old man was no longer able to shoot, but when autumn came the crack of Pícaro's gun resounded over the Balsa marsh, and the major presided once more at his weekly duck-dinners—a shadow of the old-time genial host.

One afternoon late in October, Pícaro sat with Rita in the sunken box by the clump of gum trees, awaiting the evening flight from the sea. The sun was low, the wind was dying away, and the light westerly flaws which blew in over the sandhills filled the air with the sleepy rumble of the surf. A mile offshore the dozing flocks of wildfowl rode the swell; at sundown they would rise from the sea and speed in to the feeding-grounds on singing wings. Pícaro's old gun, its barrels worn bright by years of use, stood in a corner of the box; his pipe was in his mouth, and he was gazing with deep content at the familiar marsh, the point, the stretch of coast. Rita had brought no gun; she was not sentimental over dead birds, but though she did not care to shoot, it was an old habit to accompany Pícaro. She loved the hours in the blind, the silences, the snatches of quiet talk. This afternoon she was more silent than usual; Pícaro suspected that Blaise was causing her concern. She seemed absent-minded and her face was a little pale. Finally she spoke.

"Píc," she said hesitatingly, as though it cost her an effort to find her voice: "There's something I must tell you. I hardly know how to begin . . . I'm terribly troubled and perplexed." He laid a hand on hers, patting it gently.

"Yes, tell me," he encouraged her. "What is it, old girl?"

She did not answer at once, but sat with her body tense and a troubled look in her eyes. He glanced at her profile, admiring the purity of her features, the rich brown hair, the firm and tender lips. Perversely, out of a compartment of memory he had thought forever sealed, came the thought of Tara d'Urville. He saw her as she had looked on that last night in the moonlit garden: vivid, provocative, beautiful as some sleek wild creature without a soul. Rita was beautiful in a different way, but she could never stir his senses as Tara had done. He sighed inaudibly. The magic was gone, would never return . . . perhaps it had been the magic of youth. But he knew that the woman beside him shared with his dead mother all he had to give of loyalty. She turned her

head, looking him bravely in the eyes. “It’s about Blaise,” she said.

“I don’t love him as I should,” she went on with a catch in her voice. “I’ve made a mistake, but he needs me and I’ve given my word. Do you think marriage without love is a sin? Oh dear! I don’t know what to do!” She caught her breath. Pícaro laid a hand on her shoulder and drew her to him gently. Next moment she was sobbing in his arms.

“I’ve been a fool,” he heard her murmur incoherently; “a wicked fool! I’ve spoiled both our lives—it’s you I love—it’s taken me all these years to find it out!”

When dinner was over that night, Pícaro left his father reading in the study, went to his room, undressed, and blew out the lamp. Rita’s words had stirred him profoundly, had revived in him something he had believed was dead. His life, a few hours before, seemed to stretch ahead in a vista of tranquil monotony, but now the future seemed suddenly troubled, disordered, complex. On one side he perceived an alluring vision he scarcely permitted himself to contemplate; on the other hand, a scene of renunciation. What were Blaise’s rights? He suspected that Blaise would feel only relief at the breaking of the engagement. How far should the major’s feelings be considered? To what extent was Rita bound by her word? Pícaro had never outgrown his bringing-up, and his parents had preserved the code of a less lenient age.

Wide-eyed in the darkness, he lay in troubled thought. After all, why shouldn’t he marry Rita himself, leave Blaise with his father on the Guadalupe, and take her away to France, for example, to make their home? There might be an unpleasant half hour with the major; an affair of this kind would grate on his old-fashioned ideas. Damn it! What *was* the right thing to do?

The right thing. What did that mean, anyway? Who could say with any assurance whether a thing was right or wrong? Pfeil believed that man was no more than a chance development, struggling to exist in an environment without design. Nature, or whatever lay behind it all, was indifferent, utterly aloof. In that case right and wrong were empty words—threats used to quiet unruly children at play. But was Pfeil right? In that room, which seemed still to preserve the echo of Doña Margarita’s light deliberate step, her son felt a revival of old beliefs. His eyes closed and he fell into an untroubled sleep.

It was past midnight when he awoke. He felt no fear, though he knew at once that he was not alone in the room. “Yes, Mother, I’m coming,” he whispered under his breath as he fumbled for his dressing gown.

He found Rita on the gallery, all in white, with a lamp in her hand and her hair hanging in a thick braid to her waist. She looked at him with a wondering question in her eyes. He nodded, took the lamp and led the way.

The lamp in the study still burned under its green shade, and Major

Langhorne lay in the circle of light—lay as though he had fallen asleep in his chair. His arms were folded and a book lay open on his knees, but Pícaro knew before he touched the cold wrist that his father was dead.

When Thanksgiving came, Rita asked Dr. Tisdale to dine and spend the night at the ranch. It would do Pícaro good to see him, she thought, and it was time that Blaise underwent his monthly examination.

Pícaro was dressing for dinner when little Julius knocked at his door and handed him a letter Blaise had brought from town. It was addressed in a familiar hand.

"I've been through some bad times," Foster began, "since I saw you last. When Clara agreed to divorce me, I sent for Annette and tried to settle down with her, but it was no good. She ended by making a fool of me—a sordid story I won't repeat to you. Well, I got rid of her, took a room at the club, and tried to get back into business. But that was no good either—I've changed somehow; my point of view is different nowadays. There's a fellow at the club who has a yacht; one Sunday he asked me for a sail. There must be salt water in my blood. I joined his yacht club, listened to the talk and slowly made up my mind. Now I've bought a sixty-foot schooner, had her remodelled below and rigged as a ketch, and I'm planning to make her my home from now on. Going to be my own skipper, too; that's half the fun! I've been boning up navigation—you ought to see me shoot the sun! I swing a wicked sextant already! She's going to be my home, but she won't be tied to a dock. I've got a mate, a first-class crew, and a Jap cook who could make old Pfeil open his eyes. I'm starting south early in the spring: down to the Canal, through to the Pacific and across to that island with the ungodly name, where Orsay lives. Lord! Won't the old boy be surprised! Now for the proposition I've been leading up to. Why not come with me? I don't want to pry into your affairs, but I judge that you're at a bit of a loose end yourself. If so, why not come along? I'd rather have you than anyone else in the world. If you want, after we've had a visit with Gaby, we'll keep on to the west and come home by way of Suez and the Mediterranean. How does that sound? Let me know as soon as you can decide; if you can't come, I must try to pick up someone else."

After dinner Blaise took his new racing-car out for one of the night drives which seemed to calm his nerves. Rita was sewing in her room; Pícaro sat with Doctor Tisdale in the study where Major Langhorne had died a month before. The doctor had grown stout; the pince-nez of his youth were replaced by gold-rimmed spectacles and he wore a short dark beard. They were speaking of Blaise.

"I went over him thoroughly," the doctor said; "physically, he's out of the woods. If he takes care of himself from now on, he'll live to be an old man.

But mentally . . .” he shrugged his shoulders. “It’s the strain of flying, I suppose. I tell you, Píc, it’ll be years before we realize the consequences of the war! Any man who went through the fighting is apt to develop a neurotic streak, and the curious part of it is that it doesn’t always show up at once.”

“Is he well enough to marry?” asked Pícaro. The doctor smiled.

“Absolutely!” he declared. “If he asked me, I’d give my consent to-day. In fact I think marriage would be a good thing for him.

“How about you,” Doctor Tisdale went on. “Are you going to stop on the ranch?”

“Damned if I know, Bob—I haven’t made up my mind. One of my friends is starting off for a cruise on his yacht: across the Pacific and on around the world, perhaps. He’s asked me to go—I have an idea I may accept.”

The doctor nodded without comment, folded his arms and studied the toes of his boots for a moment before he looked up. He seemed about to speak, thought better of it and rose from his chair with a little sigh.

“I hope you’ll excuse me if I say good night,” he apologized. “I haven’t had a real sleep for a week. An epidemic of births! Give me something to read—I’ve a bad habit of reading in bed.” He chose a book from the table, smiled at his host and stifled a yawn as he turned away.

Five minutes later Pícaro knocked at Rita’s door. He found her sewing by a table littered with feminine gear. She smiled up at him and nodded toward the chair he liked.

“Bob’s tired,” he told her; “he’s gone to bed.”

“What did he say about Blaise?”

“That he’s out of the woods.”

“That’s good.”

She pronounced the words softly, with an unconscious sadness that made his throat contract. Since the night of Major Langhorne’s death these two seemed to have come to an agreement, an understanding brought about without speech.

“And you, Píc, what are you going to do?” asked Rita at the end of a long silence.

“I’m not sure,” he said; “I don’t believe I could stay here.” The last words slipped out in spite of him. He rose, impelled by an agitation that was beyond control, and muttered something about having a letter to write.

Dawn was close at hand when Pícaro was awakened by a soft insistent knocking at his door. Little by little the sound penetrated his consciousness; he sprang out of bed and found Domingo in the gallery. The old man carried a lantern and as the other appeared he put a finger to his lips.

“Ay, Don Enrique,” he whispered, “there has been an accident. We must

take care not to awaken the *nena*! A terrible business, *por Dios!* . . . The man from the garage in San Ygnacio is outside."

They found him talking in low tones with Concha. His father had been the keeper of the livery stable years before, and Pícaro remembered him well. He was a good-natured fellow with a slack mouth and bulging blue eyes; and he seemed to derive a curious grim relish from his news. He told his story in short disconnected phrases, with an unhurried volubility.

"Mighty fast car—fastest thing in this part of the state! And he could drive her—I'll tell the world! I've been doing sixty on that stretch north of town and had him pass me like I was tied to a hitching-post. He must have been up to the city last night—come home late and hit that stretch like he always did. That's a sharp turn where the road leaves the *mesa*—he didn't slow down enough—went right through the fence, on over the bluff and down a hundred feet onto the rocks! God! The car's a sight and he's all smashed to pieces—the boys are bringing him in town."

By eight o'clock Pícaro and Tisdale had done what was to be done. They were making a silent breakfast in a restaurant when they saw Young Julius drive past, with Rita in the back seat, looking about anxiously. Pícaro sprang to the door and called to her. The look in her eyes told him that she knew about Blaise.

"There's nothing more I can do," Tisdale was saying as they stood in the dusty street; "I must get home now. No use trying to tell you how I feel. . . ." He took Rita's hand in both his own, gave Pícaro a quick handclasp and Julius a nod. "I'll run down to-morrow," he ended, as he turned toward where his own car stood.

Pícaro had a foot on the running-board when he stopped as though arrested by a sudden thought. "You don't mind waiting a minute?" he asked Rita; "I've a wire to send."

It was only a step to the station, where the telegraph operator sat by his clicking instrument. Langhorne nodded to the man, whom he had known for twenty years, drew a blank across the counter and took out his fountain pen.

"Mr. Bradley Foster," he wrote slowly; "Engineers' Club, New York. Blaise killed motor accident, impossible accept invitation, writing. E. L."

He walked to the car; got in beside the girl. Julius glanced back questioningly; Pícaro nodded in the direction of the ranch. Curious eyes followed them as the car moved through the little town and turned into the paved road leading south. They sat without a word, without a glance exchanged. Langhorne was thinking of the evening when Blaise had come into his room to speak of Hérault's death. The voice of the girl beside him recalled him to the living world—to a future he and Rita were to face alone.

“Concha told me,” she said softly, as though fearing to disturb his thoughts.

She reached out, with a gesture timid and caressing, to stroke his hand. It seemed to Pícaro that her gentle touch effaced the past, brushed away all sorrow and perplexity. This was his Rita—the woman he had always loved. The future stretched ahead of them plain as the straight white road before the car. As he bent his head to kiss her, very tenderly, Langhorne discovered that his cheeks were wet with tears.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Pícaro* by Charles Bernard Nordhoff]