

HIS UNKNOWN WIFE

BY

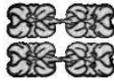
LOUIS TRACY

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BY

LOUIS TRACY

AUTHOR OF
THE WINGS OF THE MORNING,
FLOWER OF THE GORSE, ETC.



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CHAPTER I

SHARP WORK

“Prisoner, attention! His excellency the President has permitted Señor Steinbaum to visit you.”

The “prisoner” was lying on his back on a plank bed, with his hands tucked beneath his head to obtain some measure of protection from the roll of rough fiber matting which formed a pillow. He did not pay the slightest heed to the half-caste Spanish jailer’s gruff command. But the visitor’s name stirred him. He turned his head, apparently to make sure that he was not being deceived, and rose on an elbow.

“Hello, Steinbaum!” he said in English. “What’s the swindle? Excuse this terseness, but I have to die in an hour, or even less, if a sunbeam hasn’t misled me.”

“There’s no swindle this time, Mr. Maseden,” came the guttural answer. “I’m sorry I cannot help you, but I want you to do a good turn for a lady.”

“A lady! What lady?”

“I don’t know.”

“If *you* don’t know the lady that is a recommendation in itself. At any rate, what sort of good turn can a man condemned to death do for any lady?”

“She wants to marry you.”

Then the man who, by his own showing, was rapidly nearing the close of his earthly career, sprang erect and looked so threatening that his visitor shrank back a pace, while the half-caste jailer’s right hand clutched the butt of a revolver.

“Whatever else I may have thought you, I never regarded you as a fool, Steinbaum,” he said sternly. “Go away, man! Have you no sense of decency? You and that skunk Enrico Suarez, have done your worst against me and succeeded. When I am dead the ‘state’ will collar my property—and I am well aware that in this instance the ‘state’ will be represented by Señor Enrico Suarez and Mr. Fritz Steinbaum. You are about to murder and rob me. Can’t you leave me in peace during the last few minutes of my life? Be off, or you may find that in coming here you have acted foolishly for once.”

"*Ach, was!*" sighed Steinbaum, nevertheless retreating another step towards the door and the watchful half-caste, who had been warned to shoot straight and quickly if the prisoner attacked the august person of the portly financier. "I tell you the truth, and you will not listen. It is as I say. A lady, a stranger, arrived in Cartagena last night. She heard of you this morning. She asked: 'Is he married, this American?' They said, 'No.' Then she came to me and begged me to use my influence with the President. She said: 'If this American gentleman is to be shot, I am sorry; but it cannot matter to him if he is married, and it will oblige me very much.' I told her—"

The speaker's voice grew husky and he paused to clear his throat. Maseden smiled wanly at the mad absurdity of it, but he was beginning to believe some part of Steinbaum's story.

"And what did you tell her?" he broke in.

"I told her that you were Quixotic in some things, and you might agree."

"But what on earth does the lady gain by it? Suarez and you will take mighty good care she doesn't get away with my ranch and money. Does she want my name?"

"Perhaps."

Maseden took thought a moment.

"It has never been dishonored during my life," he said quietly. "I would need to be assured that it will not be smirched after my death."

Steinbaum was stout. A certain anxiety to succeed in an extraordinary mission, joined to the warm, moist atmosphere of the cell, had induced a copious perspiration.

"*Ach, Gott!*" he purred despairingly. "I know nothing. She told me nothing. She offered to pay me for the trouble—"

"Ah!"

"Why not? I run some risk in acting so. She is American, like yourself. She came to me—"

"American, you say! Is she young?"

"I think so. I have not seen her face. She wears a thick veil."

Romance suddenly spread its fairy wings in that squalid South American prison-house. Maseden's spirit was fired to perform a last act of chivalry, of mercy, it might be, in behalf of some unhappy girl of his own race. The sheer folly of this amazing marriage moved him to grim mirth.

"Very well," he said with a half-hearted laugh. "I'll do it! But, as *you* are mixing the cards, Steinbaum, there must be a joker in the pack somewhere. I'm a pretty quick thinker, you know, and I shall probably see through your proposition before I die, though I am damned if I can size it up right off."

"Mr. Maseden, I assure you, on my—well, you and I never were friends and never will be, but I have told you the real facts this time."

"When is the wedding to take place?"

"Now."

"Great Scott! Did the lady come with you?"

"Yes. She is here with a priest and a notary."

Maseden peered over the jailer's shoulder into the whitewashed passage beyond the half-open door, as though he expected to find a shrouded figure standing there. Steinbaum interpreted his glance.

"She is in the great hall," he said. "The guard is waiting at the end of the corridor."

"Oh, it's to be a military wedding, then?"

"Yes, in a sense."

The younger man appreciated the nice distinction Steinbaum was drawing. The waiting "guard" was the firing-party.

"What time is it?" he demanded, so sharply that the fat man started. For a skilled intriguer Steinbaum was ridiculously nervous.

"A quarter past seven."

"Allow me to put the question as delicately as possible, but—er—is there any extension of time beyond eight o'clock?"

"Señor Suarez would not give one minute."

"He knows about the ceremony, of course?"

“Yes.”

“What a skunk the man is! How he must fear me! Such Spartan inflexibility is foreign to the Spanish nature.... By the way, Steinbaum, did you ever, in your innocent youth, hear the opera ‘Maritana,’ or see a play called ‘Don Cesar de Bazan’?”

“Why waste time, Mr. Maseden?” cried the other impatiently. He loathed the environment of that dim cell, with its slightly foetid air, suggestive of yellow jack and dysentery. He was so obviously ill at ease, so fearful lest he should fail in an extraordinary negotiation, that, given less strenuous conditions, the younger man must have read more into the proposal than appeared on the face of it.

But the sands of life were running short for Maseden. Outwardly cool and imperturbably American, his soul was in revolt. For all that he laughed cheerfully.

“Waste time, indeed!” he cried. “I, who have less than forty-five minutes to live!... Now, these are my terms.”

“There are no terms,” broke in Steinbaum harshly. “You oblige the lady, or you don’t. Please yourself.”

“Ah, that’s better. That sounds more like the hound that I know you are. Yet, I insist on my terms.

“I was dragged out of bed in my pajamas at four o’clock this morning, and not even permitted to dress. They hardly waited to get me a pair of boots. I haven’t a red cent in my pocket, which is a figure of speech, because I haven’t a pocket. If you think you can borrow from an old comedy just so much of the situation as suits your purpose and disregard the costume and appearance of the star actor, you’re mistaken.

“I gather from your furious grunts that you don’t understand me. Very well. I’ll come straight to the point. If I am to marry the lady of your choice, I demand the right to appear at the altar decently clad and with enough good money in my pocket to stand a few bottles of wine to the gallant blackguards who are about to shoot me.

“Those are my terms, Steinbaum. Take them or leave them! But don’t accuse *me* of wasting time. It’s up to you to arrange the stage setting. I might have insisted on a shave, but I won’t.

“The lady will not expect me to kiss her, I suppose?... By gad, she must be a person of strange tastes. Why any young woman should want to marry a man because he’s going to be shot half an hour later is one of those mysteries which the feminine mind may comprehend, but it’s beyond me. However, that’s her affair, not mine.

“Now, Steinbaum, hurry up! *I’m* talking for the mere sake of hearing my own voice, but *you’re* keeping the lady in suspense.”

Maseden had indeed correctly described his own attitude. He was wholly indifferent to the personal element in the bizarre compact proposed by his arch-enemy, on whom he had turned his back while speaking.

The sight of a bloated, angry, perplexed face of the coarsest type was mentally disturbing. He elected rather to watch the shaft of sunlight coming through the long, narrow slit in a four-foot wall which served as a window. He knew that his cell was on the northeast side of the prison, and the traveling sunbeam had already marked the flight of time with sufficient accuracy since he was thrust into that dismal place.

He had been sentenced to death just one hour and a half after being arrested. The evidence, like the trial, was a travesty of justice. His excellency Don Enrico Suarez, elected president of the Republic of San Juan at midnight, and confirmed in power by the bullet which removed his predecessor, wreaked vengeance speedily on the American intruder who had helped to mar his schemes twice in two years.

There would be a diplomatic squabble about the judicial murder of a citizen of the United States, of course. The American and British consuls would protest, and both countries would dispatch warships to Cartagena, which was at once the capital of the republic and its chief port. But of what avail such wrangling after one was dead?

Dead, at twenty-eight, when the world was bright and fortune was apparently smiling! Dead, because he supported dear old Domenico Valdes, the murdered president, and one of the few honest, God-fearing men in a rotten little South American state which would have been swept out of putrid existence long ago were it not for the policy of the Monroe Doctrine. Maseden knew that no power on earth would save him now, because Suarez and he could not exist in the same community, and Suarez was supreme in the Republic of San Juan—supreme, that is, until some other cut-throat climbed to the presidency over a rival’s corpse. Steinbaum, a crafty person who played the game of high politics with

some ability and seldom failed to advance his own and his allies' interests, had backed Suarez financially and would become his jackal for the time.

It was rather surprising that such a master-plotter should have admitted a fore-knowledge of Maseden's fate, and this element in the situation suddenly dawned on Maseden himself. The arrest, the trial, and the condemnation were alike kept secret.

The American consul, a Portuguese merchant, possessed enough backbone to demand the postponement of the execution until he had communicated with Washington, and in this action he would have been supported by the representative of Great Britain. But he would know nothing about the judicial crime until it was an accomplished fact.

How, then, had some enterprising young lady—

“By the way, Steinbaum, you might explain—”

Maseden swung on his heel; the matrimonial agent had vanished.

“The señor signified that he would return soon,” said the jailer.

“He's gone for the clothes!” mused Maseden, his thoughts promptly reverting to the fantastic marriage project. “The sly old fox is devilish anxious to get me spliced before my number goes up. I wonder why? And where in the world will he raise a suitable rig? Hang it all, I wish I had a little longer to live. This business becomes more interesting every minute!”

Though he was sure the attempt would be hopeless, Maseden resolved to make one last effort. He looked the half-caste squarely in the face.

“Get me out of this before Señor Steinbaum comes back and I'll give you twenty thousand dollars gold,” he said quietly.

The man met his glance without flinching.

“I could not help you, señor, if you paid me a million dollars,” he answered. “It is your life or mine—those are my orders. And it is useless to think of attacking me,” he added, because for one moment black despair scowled menacingly from Maseden's strong features. “There are ten men at each door of the corridor ready to shoot you at the least sign of any attempt to escape.”

“The preparations for the wedding are fairly complete, then?”

Maseden spoke Spanish fluently, and the half-caste grinned at the joke.

“It will soon be over, señor,” was all he could find to say.

The condemned man knew that the fellow was not to be bribed at the cost of his own life. He turned again and grew interested once more in the shaft of sunlight. How quickly it moved! He calculated that before it reached a certain crack in the masonry he would have passed into “yesterday’s seven thousand years.”

It was not a pleasing conceit. In self-defense, as it were, he bent his wits on to the proposed marriage. He was half inclined to regret the chivalrous impulse which spurred him to agree to it. Yet there was a spice of humor in the fact that a man who was regarded as an inveterate woman-hater by the dusky young ladies of San Juan should be led to the altar literally at the eleventh hour.

What manner of woman could this unknown bride be? What motive swayed her? Perhaps it was better not to ask. But if the knot were tied by a priest, a notary and a European financier, it was evidently intended to be a valid undertaking.

And why was Steinbaum so interested? Was the would-be Mrs. Maseden so well endowed with this world’s goods that she spared no expense in attaining her object?

The most contrary emotions surged through Maseden’s conscience. He was by turns curious, sympathetic, suspicious, absurdly eager to learn more.

In this last mood he resolved to have one straight look at the lady. Surely a man was entitled to see his bride’s face! Yes, come what might, he would insist that she must raise the “thick, white veil” which had hitherto screened her features from Steinbaum’s goggle eyes—supposing, that is, the rascal had told the truth.

A hinge creaked, and the half-caste announced that the señor was returning. In a few seconds Steinbaum panted in. He was carrying a gorgeous uniform of sky-blue cloth with facings of silver braid. As he dumped a pair of brilliant patent-leather top-boots on the stone floor a glittering helmet fell from among the clothes and rolled to Maseden’s feet.

“See here, Steinbaum, what tomfoolery is this?” cried the American wrathfully.

“It is your tomfoolery, not mine,” came the heated retort. “Where am I to get a suit of clothes for you? These will fit, I think. I borrowed them from the President’s *aide-de-camp*, Captain Ferdinando Gomez.”

Maseden knew Captain Gomez—a South American dandy of the first water. For the moment the ludicrous side of the business banished all other considerations.

“What!” he laughed, “am I to be married in the giddy rig of the biggest ass in Cartagena? Well, I give in. As I’m to be shot at eight, Ferdinando’s fine feathers will be in a sad mess, because I’ll not take ’em off again unless I’m undressed forcibly. Good Lord! Does my unknown bride realize what sort of rare bird she’s going to espouse?...”

“Yes, yes, we’re losing time. Chuck over those pants. Gomez is not quite my height, but his togs may be O. K.”

As a matter of fact, Philip Alexander Maseden looked a very fine figure of a man when arrayed in all the glory of the presidential *aide-de-camp*. The only trouble was that the elegant top-boots were confoundedly tight, being, in truth, a size too small for their vain owner; but the bridegroom-elect put up with this inconvenience.

He had not far to walk. A few steps to the right lay the “great hall” in which, according to Steinbaum, the ceremony would take place. Very little farther to the left was the enclosed *patio*, or courtyard, in which he would be shot within thirty minutes!

“I’m dashed if I feel a bit like dying,” he said, as he strode by Steinbaum’s side along the outer corridor. “If the time was about fourteen hours later I might imagine I was going to a fancy dress ball, though I wouldn’t be able to dance much in these confounded boots.”

The stout financier made no reply. He was singularly ill at ease. Any critical onlooker, not cognizant of the facts, would take him and not Maseden to be the man condemned to death.

A heavy, iron-clamped door leading to the row of cells was wide open. Some soldiers, lined up close to it in the hall, were craning their necks to catch a first glimpse of the Americano who was about to marry and die in the same breath, so to speak.

Beyond, near a table in the center of the spacious chamber, stood a group that arrested the eye—a Spanish priest, in vestments of semi-state; an olive-skinned man whom Maseden recognized as a legal practitioner of

fair repute in a community where chicanery flourished, and a slenderly-built woman of middle height, though taller than either of her companions, whose stylish coat and skirt of thin, gray cloth, and smart shoes tied with little bows of black ribbon, were strangely incongruous with the black lace mantilla which draped her head and shoulders, and held in position a double veil tied firmly beneath her chin.

Maseden was so astonished at discovering the identity of the lawyer that he momentarily lost interest in the mysterious woman who would soon be his wife.

“Señor Porilla!” he cried. “I am glad you are here. Do you understand—”

“It is forbidden!” hissed Steinbaum. “One more word, and back you go to your cell!”

“Oh, is that part of the compact?” said Maseden cheerfully. “Well, well! We must not make matters unpleasant for a lady—must we, Steinbaum?... Now, madam, raise your veil, and let me at least have the honor of knowing what sort of person the future Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden will be!”

The only answer was a stifled but quite audible sob, and Maseden had an impression that the lady might put a summary stop to the proceedings by fainting.

Steinbaum, however, had recovered his nerve in the stronger light of the great hall, especially since the soldiers had gathered around.

“The señora declines to unveil,” he growled in Spanish. “Begin, *padre!* There is not a moment to spare.”

The ecclesiastic opened a book and plunged forthwith into the marriage service. Maseden was aware that the shrinking figure by his side was trembling violently, and a wave of pity for her surged through his heart.

“Cheer up!” he whispered. “It’s only a matter of form, anyhow; and I’m glad to be able to help you. I don’t care a red cent what your motive is.”

Steinbaum gurgled ominously, and the bridegroom said no more. Clearly, though he had given no bond, he was imperiling the fulfillment of this unhappy girl’s desire if he talked.

But he kept his wits alert. It was evident that the lady understood little Latin and no Spanish. She was quite unable to follow the sonorous phrases. When the portly priest, who seemed to have small relish for the

part he was compelled to play in this amazing marriage, asked Maseden if he would have “this woman” to be his wedded wife, the bridegroom answered “Yes,” in Spanish; but a similar question addressed to the bride found her dumb.

“Say ‘I will,’” murmured Maseden in her ear.

She turned slightly. At that instant their heads came close together, and the long, unfamiliar fragrance of a woman’s well-tended hair reached him.

It had an extraordinary effect. Memories of his mother, of a simple old-world dwelling in a Vermont village, rushed in on him with an almost overwhelming force.

His superb self-possession nearly gave way. He felt that he might break down under the intolerable strain.

He feared, during a few seconds of anguish, that he might reveal his heartache to these men of inferior races.

Then the pride of a regal birthright came to his aid, and a species of most vivid and poignant consciousness succeeded. He heard Steinbaum’s gruff sponsorship for the bride, obeyed smilingly when told to take her right hand in his right hand, and looked with singular intentness at the long, straight, artistic fingers which he held.

It was a beautifully modeled hand, well kept, but cold and tremulous. The queer conceit leaped up in him that though he might never look on the face of his wedded wife he would know that hand if they met again only at the Judgment Seat!

Then, in a dazed way which impressed the onlookers as the height of American nonchalance, he said, after the celebrant: “I, Philip Alexander, take thee, Madeleine—”

Madeleine! So that was the Christian name of the woman whom he was taking “till death do us part,” for the Spanish liturgy provided almost an exact equivalent of the English service. Madeleine! He had never even known any girl of the name. Somehow, he liked it. Outwardly so calm, he was inwardly aflame with a new longing for life and all that life meant.

His jumbled wits were peremptorily recalled to the demands of the moment by the would-be bride’s failure to repeat her share of the marriage vow, when it became her turn to take Maseden’s hand.

The priest nodded, and Steinbaum, now carrying himself with a certain truculence, essayed to lead the girl's faltering tongue through the Spanish phrases.

"The lady must understand what she is saying," broke in Maseden, dominating the gruff man by sheer force of will.

"Now," he said, and his voice grew gentle as he turned to the woman he had just promised "to have and to hold," "to love and cherish," and thereto plighted his troth—"when the priest pauses, I will translate, and you must speak the words aloud."

He listened, in a waking trance, to the clear, well-bred accents of a woman of his own people uttering the binding pledge of matrimony. The Spanish sentences recalled the English version, which he supplied with singular accuracy, seeing that he had only attended two weddings previously, and those during his boyhood.

"Madeleine"—he would learn her surname when he signed the register—was obviously hard pressed to retain her senses till the end. She was sobbing pitifully, and the knowledge that her distress was induced by the fate immediately in store for the man whom she was espousing "by God's holy ordinance" tested Maseden's steel nerve to the very limit of endurance.

But he held on with that tenacious chivalry which is the finest characteristic of his class, and even smiled at Steinbaum's fumbling in a waistcoat pocket for a ring. He was putting the ring on the fourth finger of his wife's left hand and pronouncing the last formula of the ceremony, when he caught an agonized whisper:

"Please, *please*, forgive me! I cannot help myself. I am—more than sorry for you. I shall pray for you—and think of you—always!"

And it was in that instant, while breathlessly catching each syllable of a broken plea for sympathy and gage of lasting remembrance, that Maseden's bemused faculties saw a means of saving his life.

Though a forlorn hope, at the best, with a hundred chances of failure against one of success, he would seize that hundredth chance. What matter if he were shot at quarter to eight instead of at eight o'clock? Steel before, he was unemotional as marble now, a man of stone with a brain of diamond clarity.

If events followed their normal and reasonable course, he would be free of these accursed walls within a few minutes. Come what might, he would strike a lusty blow for freedom. If he failed, and sank into eternal night, one or more of the half-caste hirelings now so ready to fulfill the murderous schemes of President Suarez and his henchman Steinbaum would escort an American's spirit to the realm beyond the shadows.

He did not stop to think that an unknown woman's strange whim should have made possible that which, without her presence in his prison-house, was absolutely impossible; still less did he trouble as to the future, immediate or remote. His mind's eye was fixed on a sunbeam creeping stealthily towards a crack in the masonry of that detestable cell.

He meant to cheat that sunbeam, one way or the other!

CHAPTER II

TIME *VERSUS* ETERNITY

Henceforth Maseden concentrated all his faculties on the successful performance of the trick which might win him clear of the castle of San Juan. Nothing in the wide world mattered less to him than that the newly-made bride should stoop to sign the register after he had done so, or that by turning to address Steinbaum he was deliberately throwing away the opportunity thus afforded of learning her surname.

When an avowed enemy first broached the subject of this extraordinary marriage, he had made a bitter jest on the use in real life of a well-worn histrionic situation. And now, perforce, he had become an actor of rare merit. Each look, each word must lead up to the grand climax. The penalty of failure was not the boredom of an audience, but death; such a "curtain" would sharpen the dullest wits, and Maseden, if wholly innocent of stage experience hitherto, was not dull.

He scored his first point while the bride was signing her name. Beaming on Steinbaum, he said cheerfully:

"I bargained for money, Shylock. You've had your pound of flesh. Where are my ducats?"

Steinbaum produced a ten-dollar bill. He even forced a smile. Seemingly he was anxious to keep the prisoner in this devil-may-care mood.

"Not half enough!" cried Maseden, and he broke into Spanish.

"Hi, my gallant *caballeros*, isn't there another squad in the *patio*?"

"*Si, señor!*" cried several voices.

Even these crude, half-caste soldiers revealed the Latin sense of the dramatic and picturesque. They appreciated the American's cavalier air. That morning's doings would lose naught in the telling when the story spread through the cafés of Cartagena.

And what a story they would have to tell! Little could they guess its scope, its sensations yet to come.

"Very well, then! At least another ten-spot, Steinbaum.... But, mind you, sergeant, not a drop till the volley is fired! You might miss, you know!"

The man whom he addressed as sergeant eyed the two notes with an amiable grin.

“You will feel nothing, señor—we promise you that,” he said wondering, perhaps, why the prisoner did not bestow the largesse at once.

“Excellent! Lead on, friend! I want my last few minutes to myself.”

“There are some documents to complete,” put in Steinbaum hastily, with a quick hand-flourish to the notary.

Señor Porilla spread two legal-looking parchments on the table.

“These are conveyances of your property to your wife,” he explained. “I am instructed to see that everything is done in accordance with the laws of the Republic. By these deeds you—”

“Hand over everything to the lady. Is *that* it? I understand. Where do I sign? Here? Thank you. And here? Nothing else ... Mrs. Maseden, I have given you my name and all my worldly goods. Pray make good use of both endowments.... Now, I demand to be left alone.”

Without so much as a farewell glance at his wife, who, to keep herself from falling, was leaning on the table, he strode off in the direction of the corridor into which his cell opened. It was a vital part of his scheme that he should enter first.

The jailer would have left the door open. Maseden was determined that it should be closed.

Captain Gomez’s tight boots pinched his toes cruelly as he walked, but he recked little of that minor inconvenience at the moment. In four or five rapid paces he reached the doorway and passed through it. There he turned with his right hand on the door itself, and his left hand, carrying the helmet, raised in a parting salute. He smiled most affably, and, of set purpose, spoke in Spanish.

“Good-by, señora!” he said. “Farewell, gentlemen! I shall remember this pleasant gathering as long as I live!”

The half-caste was at his prisoner’s side, and enjoying the episode thoroughly. He would swill his share of the wine, of course, and the hour of the *siesta* should find him comfortably drunk.

Maseden flourished his left hand again, and the plumed helmet temporarily obscured the jailer’s vision. The door swung on its hinges. The

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