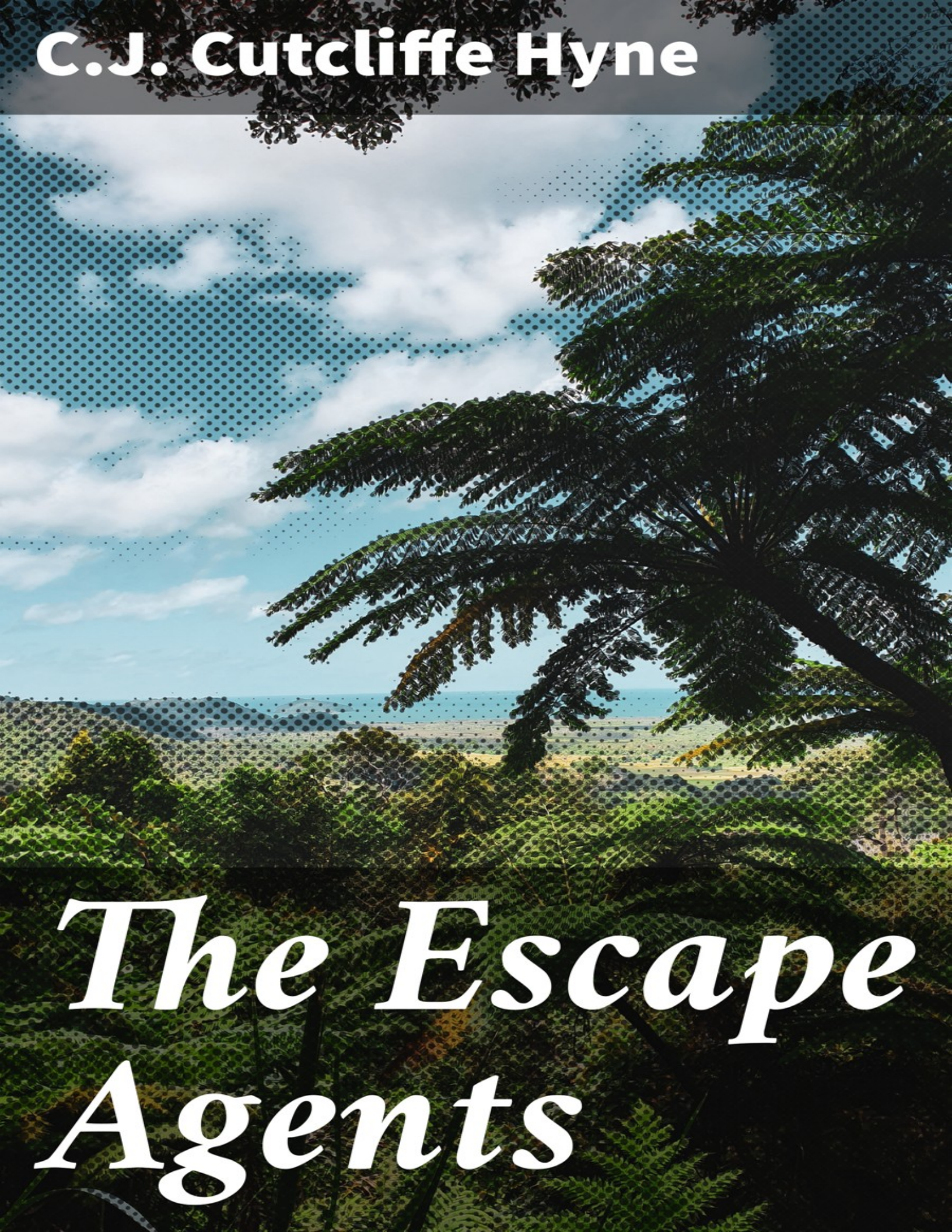




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*The Escape
Agents*

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THE NEW COMMISSION

"I AM not in the French Army for the sheer sport of the thing," said the tall thin man that the others addressed as Major, or Colt, or Joseph, according to their degree of intimacy. He took the long clay pipe from his lips, and punctuated the sentences with its stem. "I'm here to learn the art of war from the best teachers, and to get a position. If possible, and if it can be done within the time, I intend to try what a marshal's bâton feels like for a riding switch."

"And then won't you give the girls a treat in Europe?" bantered the dandified little Colonel Paillard.

"No, sir," said Colt. "Once I get my education complete here, back I go to the United States to realise on it; and as for girls, I don't care for you to forget that I am affianced to a Miss Patience Collier, of No. 207 Pilgrim Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts." He mopped his brow and shifted his chair forward into the window to catch the breeze. "Miss Collier is at present following the occupation of schoolmarm, combined with that of historian, and it was she who suggested that, as I was set upon the military profession, I should come to Europe, and go through a regular college course in one of Emperor Bonaparte's armies. I am supplying her by mail with subject-matter for her 'Conduct of the Continental Wars.'"

Colonel Paillard took snuff with an air. "Pah!" he said; "you talk, you Americans, but you are not like those solid English; you do not mean all you say. You have tasted Europe; you will not go back again to your dark and savage America. Mademoiselle Collier must come to adorn France."

"It's little you know her. She's of the strictest Puritan stock. She'd as soon think of turning Mohawk as Frenchwoman."

"If she is a true sweetheart, my dear Joe, she will have regard for your prospects. Here you are, a field officer at twenty-seven, and two years ago you were a private soldier, just starting to learn the rudiments of war and the French language."

"I wasn't exactly new to war when Miss Collier had me come over to this side. I was raised on our frontier, Colonel, and out there a man can only quit Indian fighting when he ceases to sit up and breathe fresh air."

"Learning to steal one another's scalps," said the grizzled Captain Ricaud, "is not exactly war as the Emperor teaches it."

"Well," drawled Colt, rubbing his blue-black chin, "as the only man here who has sampled each brand, I say that both were originally baled out of the same keg. Now, General Dupont, that we're under right now here in Spain, is allowed by all judges to have his uniform as Marshal of France cut and ready for him in Paris against when he comes back. Well, gentlemen, I assisted him and you to sack Cordova last week, and I brought along a nice jewelled mayor's chain and that picture against the wall there, which you tell me is a Velasquez."

"I repeat my offer of the pair of black jennets for the portrait," said Paillard.

"Nope. I guess we got mules in the States already, but our future home, when I marry and we furnish one at Washington, could do with a Velasquez. I was going to tell

you, though, that I was there when Ephraim Taylor's men sacked the Mohawk villages at Striped Rock."

"Never heard of either him, them, or it," laughed Colonel Paillard.

Colt thumped the table.

"There you have the whole case in a clamshell. Out of the Striped Rock fight I got a pack of beaver skins which turned out later to be full of moth. We have no titles chucked in out West. Here, for less work, I get named Major, and find the wherewithal to keep up my rank and style. As a Major in the French Service I'd step straight above Ephraim Taylor's head, for instance, in one push at home. That is what Miss Collier predicted at No. 207 the night before I sailed from Boston harbour."

But at this point the list of Major Colt's ambitions was cut short. There was no preliminary noise from outside to show that the outpost of General Dupont's army, of which they were officers, was being attacked. A bullet hummed in through the window, and, hitting the plaster on the further wall diagonally, ploughed a great streak along it, and as a finale, dived behind the Velasquez, and blew out the face of the portrait into a mere star of rags and paint.

Colt, with the quickness of a conjurer, tipped his chair over and fell backwards on to the floor before the noise of the shot came to them, skillfully saving his long clay pipe from fracture. Grizzled old Ricaud sneered from the table.

"Pooh!" he said, "bullets don't kill, Major, though to beginners I believe they are startling. Now, at the Pyramids, where I had the honour to carry a musket---"

Captain Ricaud broke off, and coincidental with his last syllable, a curious sharp squelching noise came from his head. As he pitched awkwardly off on to the floor, both observers commented on the accuracy with which the second bullet had struck the exact centre of his brow.

Colonel Paillard made a leisurely step to the shelter of the wall, and again took snuff. "But still, my dear Joe, in spite of the exception which has just been proved, I must maintain the theory that bullets do not kill. I fancy that Ricaud was going to point out that it is undignified for French officers to hurry out of their way."

"Ricaud is dead," snapped Colt. The window commanded most of the room, and through it other bullets were hopping, which scored further furrows in the plaster, and made other gaps in the Velasquez. Major Colt, on hands and knees, was keeping under the level of the window sill, and making for the door.

"And so, of course, you cannot challenge him," continued Paillard gently; "but as I'm sure you would not like to miss having satisfaction for what has been said, I shall be most pleased to assure you that his sentiments on the matter are entirely my own."

Colt got to the shelter of the doorway, stood up, and scratched his square black whiskers. "You wait till we're out of the present mess, and then I'll see about combing your hair for you if you still want it. My Land! They're scrapping downstairs now. Colonel, this post has been fairly rushed, and we've been caught talking instead of being out on the job."

When it came to the point Colonel Paillard was sufficiently alert to his duties. He snapped the snuff-box and crammed it into his pocket. Then he vaulted out of the window through which the bullets were arriving, and shouted fiercely for the troops to rally round the church.

Colonel Paillard had carried his first musket as a super on the Porte St Martin stage, and the actor's love of showy display still stuck to him. He brimmed with bravery; but his was the bravery which aches to show itself before an audience. Here, outside in the street, and in the ranks of the opposite houses, was an audience ready enough; but it was an hostile audience, with never a plaudit; throwing criticisms instead, in the form of more bullets. One chance shot took the florid little Colonel in mid-air, and he fell to the cobble-stones with a shriek, and one leg bone snapped in two like a pipe stem.

Forthwith from a dozen doors men came out knife in hand to finish him. Spain was raw then from the savageries of Zaragoza and the red cruelties of the sack of Cordova, and the Spaniards looked upon a Frenchman as people regard a rabid wolf--a creature beyond pity even though it be sick and pitiful, a wild beast to be exterminated.

But in the meanwhile, Major Colt was putting into use his Indian education. He crept and glided along, always silently, always in cover. His scheme was not only to preserve his own skin, but to leave the enemy unconscious of his existence. At the same time he was reconnoitring keenly and with swiftness.

He dived down the cool stone stairway, and at its foot came across the sentry limp and dead.

"Stalked and knifed," he commented. "Well, I've seen that before, only out there the chap was scalped as well. This is getting like old times. I must keep my eyes skinned, or they'll be lifting my hair next."

He swept through the temporary guard-room of the headquarters, and saw at a glance all the guard surprised and silenced for ever, and then through the doorway he saw Paillard drop helpless to the ground and a dozen men leaping out of cover to give him the coup de grâce.

Major Colt jumped out into the scorching sunlight, calling to imaginary troops to follow him. The Spaniards stopped, turned, and bolted: mere terror of the French soldiery was enough for them. The American clapped a long, thin, wiry arm round Colonel Paillard's middle, and started back with him to the guard-room.

But the Spaniards, though fluttered by the surprise, were, as men, brave enough. Quickly they returned to the attack, and as quickly Joseph Colt, on the threshold, turned to face them.

His sword lay stacked in a corner upstairs, but he had picked up a knife. Now the knife was the national weapon of the Spanish peasant, but it was native also to those American frontiersmen who were pushing the snake fences of the Eastern Settlements out towards the West. No Colonel Bowey had yet arisen to give the weapon glory and a name; but it was there in daily current use, alongside the tomahawk and the long rifle, and had been used by the red man down through history.

The Spaniards found Colt's knife play far in advance of their national science. The man jabbed upwards, and they

knew no parry to that attack, and for their downward stabs he had always a point or a fist in readiness. And then not only was he as hard as a creature built out of rolled copper, but he was as powerful as any six men, and as active as a dozen wild cats. As an exhibition he was a marvel; as a man to fight against at close quarters they had no further use for him; so they retired to give the bullets once more a chance.

But Major Colt picked up the dapper Paillard again (who had by this time crawled to the doorway) and carried him through, and shot the bolts.

"Good man, Joe," said his friend, "I owe you for my skin there. I thought we'd those Spaniards well whipped, but they are looking ugly again. Now we must think of what to do next."

"No time to think," snapped Colt; "got to do."

He clutched hold of his friend's arm, thrust a shoulder under his stomach, and ran up the stairs.

"Thousand thunders!" screamed Paillard, "mind my leg!"

"I know all about broken legs. Crawled seventeen miles in three days with one after Great Snow's son got a shot into me, back of the Lakes. But I'd his hair at my belt, too, so that perhaps made the journey lighter."

"Why, man, you've come back to the very room where we were first shot at. It looks to me the most dangerous place in the house."

"That's why it's the least likely spot for them to hunt for us in. Now keep under cover, and don't let us have any more attitudinising before the window."

"I've my dignity to consider," said the plump little Colonel, and sat back against the wall and reached for his

snuff-box.

"Now, see here. Do you want to be carved so full of holes that you'll look more like a ladder'n a man? Nope? Then, sir, you let me arrange the rest of this funeral."

There were two tables in the room, and Colt stood one on the other. "Now for a chair," he said, "and then I shall have a scaffold high enough to work from."

"What's the trick this time?" asked Paillard, dusting his uniform.

"Break a way through the plaster, get into the false roof, and so on to the next house; set fire to this one behind us to cover the retreat." Colt proceeded to climb.

But at this point a part of the panelled wall which happened to be a door, opened, and a little thin woman of thirty stepped gravely in to the room.

"I am sorry, señor, that a guest of mine should meet with such rough treatment in this village, especially a guest who has saved me and a hundred other women from so much indignity as you have done."

The American bowed from his perch. "I haven't the pleasure of recognising you, madam, but I presume you were one of those at the church. What little I did, madam, was merely what white men in my country consider it their privilege to do for any woman. The soldiers who insulted you were scum, and wanted a lesson, and, my Land! they got one."

"At your hands, señor. The French officers merely looked and laughed."

"It was my turn for duty, madame," said Colt stiffly. "In the French army it does not take two officers to do one job."

You must excuse me now, please. There are some fellows below after our scalps, and we have got to quit. He climbed a storey higher on the scaffold.

"If it is all the same to you, señor, I would rather not have my house burnt; it has historical associations, and it is the only house I've got. You see, I've been listening to your plans. If you will permit me, I will take you to a room where you will be quite safe till the trouble has blown by."

Colt came to the ground, and promptly picked up Colonel Paillard.

"I did not invite your fiend," said the lady pointedly. "He was one of those that laughed when you rescued us."

The American pulled at his black whisker.

"Madam," he said, "I guess this firm can't entertain a dissolution. If your proposition is not to take it over as a going concern under the present directorate, I reckon the deal's off."

But at this point the house door below gave plain sounds that it was giving way under the repeated attacks, and the lady was startled out of her previous attitude.

"Well, Major, you may bring the other monsieur with you for the present. But for Colonel Paillard, until he has apologised----Dear Mary! the man's fainted! There, bring him along."

Colt did not press for a more gracious permission. They slipped through into the passage. The door in the panelling was closed behind them, and they wound to the right and the left through the cool, dark alleyways of an old Spanish house; and gaining at last the attics of Colt's original design,

stepped out presently on to a high roof garden with tall white walls, once the exercise ground for a Moorish harem.

"And here," said the lady, "I design that Major Colt shall stay till the prospect tires him. When the town calms we will have in a surgeon to set the other monsieur's leg, and afterwards we will pack him off to join General Dupont and the other prisoners at Baylen, according to the terms of the capitulation--him and his snuff-box."

Colt's black eyes snapped. "Prisoners! Señora? Capitulation! I have not heard from my General for three days, but he was sitting up and taking nourishment then, and seemed hearty enough to eat up all this section of Spain if his appetite went that way."

The little lady sat back in a chair and fanned herself. One saw that she had an ankle of the neatest and most trim. "Nevertheless, Major, I tell you of the plainest fact. The heavens do fall sometimes. If you had Spain cowed, why the émeute in the streets just now?"

"Merely, as you say, an émeute."

"Well, I had hoped you would stay merely because of my beaux yeux--I like you all the better, Major, for not making these obvious compliments--but as you are still the soldier first of all, permit me to hand you a dispatch from your General."

"It has been opened," growled Colt, taking the paper.

"Obviously," said the lady with much dryness. "And if you further mark, there is a hole in each corner where it has been nailed to the church door. Oh, there is no secret about the capitulation."

"No," said Colt gloomily. "I know that signature 'Dupont, General.' My Land! Here's a mess! Here's a thing to get into the history of the war; and I know Miss Collier will not leave out a spicy chapter like this just because I happened to be snarled up in it."

"Ah! here's Colonel Paillard come out of his faint once more. Now, gentlemen, your orders--as I read them on the church door--state that the capitulation includes all outposts. You are directed to march your detachment into Baylen and surrender your arms."

"I can't march," said the dapper little Colonel, smoothing out his uniform. "They'll have to provide transport."

"But you'll go?"

"Must obey the orders of a superior; it's one of a soldier's first axioms, my dear Joe."

"I don't know much about axioms," said Colt, scratching at his square whisker, "though a lady in Boston that I always consult did insist on my reading Euclid once, as one of the necessary ingredients for culture. But I do know that a Spanish gaol isn't going to be a healthy place for French troops after the way we've been harrying Spain. I guess I'm not going to risk standing up to any torture stake this trip."

Paillard dipped fingers in his snuff-box. "Oh, one will have an honourable imprisonment, and presently there will be an exchange. The Emperor does not forget his soldiers."

"Emperor Bonaparte," said Colt drily, "according to my mensuration, forgets his soldiers least when they're close at hand, and when they've got success hot and new in their pockets. I guess he'd have far more memory for me, personally, for instance, if he saw me whittling the butt of a

Spanish ensign staff at his tent door than if he just read my name amongst ten thousand others in ex-General Dupont's list. Man, think! A whole French army capitulated, and to Spaniards! It's the Emperor's first great disaster."

Colonel Paillard shrugged his dapper shoulders. "If my General has capitulated, and I'm included in the capitulation, there's no choice in the matter."

"My Land! isn't there," snapped the American. "You watch, and you'll see me make a choice. If Dupont's got rattled, there's no reason why I should not want to save my own hair. There's that marshal's uniform we spoke about, waiting in Paris. Well, I guess Dupont won't want that now. Dupont's a short man"--Major Colt cast a humorous glance over his own lengthy limbs--"but with letting out a bit, I don't see why that uniform should be wasted yet. In a year or so's time--eh? But I've got to light out of this, and quick."

But at this point the lady intervened.

"It seems I am listening to a scheme for robbing Spain of a most redoubtable and valuable prisoner. Well, there are limits to the obligation I am under to you, Major, and I tell you frankly that if I am to permit this escape you must bribe me further."

Major Colt gave an angular bow.

"I am in the señora's power--to a certain extent."

The lady laughed.

"The size of my bribe is a private matter, and as Colonel Paillard has still not given me that apology, I do not care for him to hear it." She tapped the American on the arm with her fan. "There is a seat beyond those lemon bushes at the

further side of the garden. If you will come with me there we will talk."

"Oh, go, my dears," said the plump little Colonel. "Joe, mon brave, my congratulations on your conquest."

But when they came to the seat the lady's air changed. So far, her talk had carried a flavour of badinage, and her manner hinted at gentle admiration. But here, at once, was the woman of business, cold, and a trifle anxious.

"Major Colt," she said, and stood before him, "my condition is that you take me back to France with you."

The American was startled, and then (as a thought came to him) plainly shocked. "Certainly not, madam," he said. "In the first place, I shall travel too fast and too rough for any Spanish lady to keep pace, and in the second, I am a bachelor and a most unfitting escort."

The little woman remained stiffly before him under the glare of the sunshine, clicked her heels, and brought up her hand in military salute. "And I, my Major, am not of Spain. This is not my house. The woman of the house I met below. She babbled to me of the French, and how the American major had saved the women from a few French kisses."

"From insult, madam."

"Oh, she said insult. She said, too, that you would not so much as look at her when she tried to thank you. But at that point of her tale came the shots and the scuffling, and so I packed her into a wardrobe with her dressed and her jewels, and turned the key on her further babblings."

"Still, I do not understand how you, a Frenchwoman (as you say) came to be in this section."