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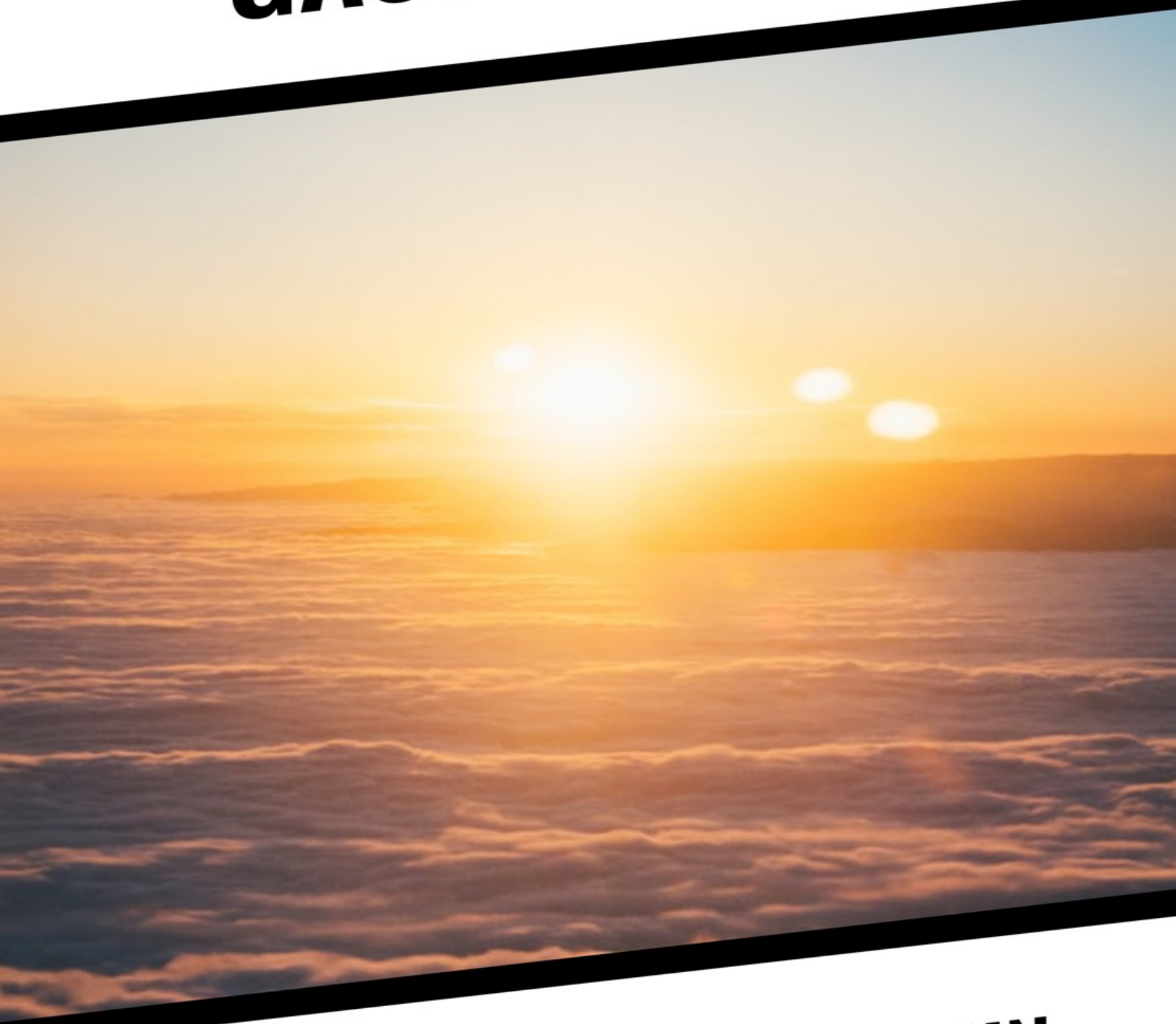
GASTON LEROUX



THE BRIDE OF THE SUN

Gaston Leroux

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BOOK I—THE GOLDEN SUN BRACELET

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As the liner steamed into Callao Roads, and long before it had anchored, it was surrounded by a flotilla of small boats. A moment later, deck, saloons and cabins were invaded by a host of gesticulating and strong-minded boatmen, whose badges attested that they were duly licensed to carry off what passengers and luggage they could. They raged impotently, however, round Francis Montgomery, F.R.S., who sat enthroned on a pile of securely locked boxes in which were stored his cherished manuscripts and books.

It was in vain that they told him it would be two full hours before the ship came alongside the Darsena dock. Nothing would part him from his treasures, nothing induce him to allow these half-crazed foreigners to hurl his precious luggage overside into those frail-looking skiffs.

When this was suggested to him by a tall young man who called him uncle, the irascible scientist explained with fluency and point that the idea was an utterly ridiculous one. So Dick Montgomery shrugged his broad shoulders, and with a “See you presently,” that hardly interrupted his uncle’s flow of words, beckoned to a boatman.

A moment later he had left the ship’s side and was nearing the shore—the Eldorado of his young ambition, the land of gold and legends, the Peru of Pizarro and the Incas. Then the thought of a young girl’s face blotted out those dreams to make way for new ones.

The monotonous outline of the waterfront brought no disappointment. Little did he care that the city stretched out there before his eyes was little more than a narrow, unbeautiful blur along the sea coast, that there were none of those towers, steeples or minarets with which our ancient ports beckon out to sea that the traveler is welcome. Even when his boat had passed the Mole, and they drew level with the modern works of the Muelle Darsena, well calculated to excite the interest of a younger engineer, he remained indifferent.

He had asked the boatman where the Calle de Lima lay, and his eyes hardly left the part of the city which had been pointed out to him in reply. At the landing stage he threw a hand-full of centavos to his man, and shouldered his way through the press of guides, interpreters, hotel touts and other waterside parasites.

Soon he was before the Calle de Lima, a thoroughfare which seemed to be the boundary line between the old city and the new. Above, to the east, was the business section—

streets broad or narrow fronted with big, modern buildings that were the homes of English, French, German, Italian and Spanish firms without number. Below, to the west, a network of tortuous rows and alleys, full of color, with colonnades and verandahs encroaching on every available space.

Dick plunged into this labyrinth, shouldered by muscular Chinamen carrying huge loads, and by lazy Indians. Here and there was to be seen a sailor leaving or entering one of the many cafés which opened their doors into the cool bustle of the narrow streets. Though it was his first visit to Callao, the young man hardly hesitated in his way. Then he stopped short against a decrepit old wall close to a verandah from which came the sound of a fresh young voice, young but very assured.

“Just as you like, señor,” it said in Spanish. “But at that price your fertilizer can only be of an inferior quality.”

For a few minutes the argument went on within. Then there was an exchange of courteous farewells and a door was closed. Dick approached the balcony and looked into the room. Seated before an enormous ledger was a young girl, busily engaged in transcribing figures into a little note-book attached by a gold chain to the daintiest of waists. Her face, a strikingly beautiful one, was a little set under its crown of coal-black hair as she bent over her task. It was not the head of a languorous Southern belle—rather the curls of Carmen helmeting a blue-eyed Minerva, a little goddess of reason of today and a thorough business-woman. At last she lifted her head.

“Maria-Teresa?...”

“Dick!”

The heavy green ledger slipped and crashed to the floor, as she ran toward him both hands outstretched.

“Well, and how is business?”

“So, so.... And how are you?... But we did not expect you till to-morrow.”

“We made rather a good passage.”

“And how is May?”

“She’s a very grown-up person now. I suppose you’ve heard? Her second baby was born just before we left.”

“And dear smoky old London?”

“It was raining hard when last I saw it.”

“But where is your uncle?”

“Still on board. He won’t leave his collection.... Does nothing all day but take notes for his next book.... Wait a minute, I’ll come in. Where’s the door? I suppose it would be bad form to climb in through the window? Won’t I be in the way, though? You seem awfully busy.”

“I am, but you may come in. Round the corner there, and the first door on your right.”

He followed her indications and found an archway leading into a huge courtyard crowded with Chinese coolies and Quichua Indians. A huge dray, coming from the direction of the harbor, rumbled under the archway, and wheeled in the court to let an empty one pass out. People and things seemed to unite in making as much dust and noise as possible.

“So she manages all this,” he reflected as he made his way toward a door at which she had appeared.

“You may kiss me,” she said as she closed the door behind them.

He took her in his arms and held her to him, by far the more troubled of the two. Again it was she who spoke first.

“So you really have not forgotten?”

“Could you believe it, dear?”

“Well, you were so long in coming.”

“But I wrote, and…”

“Well, never mind now. It is not too late. I have just refused my fourth suitor, Don Alonso de Cuelar. And father, I think, is furious with me for refusing the most eligible young man in Lima…. Well, why don’t you say something?”

“Forgive me, dear…. How is your father? and the kiddies?… I hardly know what I am saying, I am so glad.”

“Father is very well, and very glad to hear that you were coming. To tell the truth though, he is far more interested in your uncle’s visit. He has arranged a meeting at the Geographical Society for him. And for the past month he has been thinking and talking of nothing but archaeology. They have been digging up all sorts of things.”

“And so he has been angry with you?”

“He seems to think he has every reason to be. I am twenty-three and he already sees me an old maid…. It’s awfully funny! Do you know what they call me in Lima now? The Virgin of the Sun!”

“What does that mean?”

“Aunt Agnes and Aunt Irene will explain better than I can. It’s something like one of the Vestals—an old Inca legend.”

“H’m, some superstitious rot…. But look here, Maria-Teresa, I’m an awful coward. Do you think your father…”

“Of course! He’ll do anything I like if he is asked at the right moment We’ll be married in three months’ time from

San Domingo. Truly we will!”

“You dear!... But I’m only a poor devil of an engineer, and he may not think me much of a son-in-law for the Marquis de la Torre.”

“Nonsense, you’re clever, and I make you a gift of the whole of Peru. There’s plenty to do there for an engineer.”

“I can hardly believe my luck, Maria-Teresa! That I—I.... But, tell me, how did it all happen?”

“The old, old way. First you are neighbors, or meet by accident. Then you are friends... just friends, nothing else.... And then...?”

Their hands joined, and they remained thus for a moment, in silence.

Suddenly, a burst of noise came from the courtyard, and a moment later a hurried knock announced the entrance of an excited employee. At the sight of the stranger, he stopped short, but Maria-Teresa told him to speak. Dick, who both understood and spoke Spanish well, listened.

“The Indians are back from the Islands, señorita. There has been trouble between them and the Chinamen. One coolie was killed and three were badly wounded.”

Maria-Teresa showed no outward sign of emotion. Her voice hardened as she asked:—

“Where did it happen... in the Northern Islands?”

“No, at Chincha.”

“Then Huascar was there?”

“Yes, señorita. He came back with them, and is outside.”

“Send him in to me.”

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The man went out, signing as he went to a stalwart Indian who walked quietly into the office. Maria-Teresa, back at her desk, hardly raised her eyes. The newcomer, who took off his straw sombrero with a sweep worthy of a hidalgo of Castille, was a Trigullo Indian. These are perhaps the finest tribe of their race and claim descent from Manco-Capac, first king of the Incas. A mass of black hair, falling nearly to his shoulders, framed a profile which might have been copied from a bronze medallion. His eyes, strangely soft as he looked at the young girl before him, provoked immediate antagonism from Dick. He was wrapped in a bright-colored poncho, and a heavy sheath-knife hung from his belt.

“Tell me how it happened,” ordered Maria-Teresa without returning the Indian’s salute.

Under his rigid demeanor, it was evident that he resented this tone before a stranger. Then he began to speak in Quichua, only to be interrupted and told to use Spanish. The Indian frowned and glanced haughtily at the listening engineer.

“I am waiting,” said Maria-Teresa. “So your Indians have killed one of my coolies?”

“The shameless ones laughed because our Indians fired cohetes in honor of the first quarter of the moon.”

“I do not pay your Indians to pass their time in setting off fireworks.”

“It was the occasion of the Noble Feast of the Moon.”

“Yes, I know! The moon, and the stars, and the sun, and every Catholic festival as well! Your Indians do nothing but celebrate. They are lazy, and drunkards. I have stood them, so far because they were your friends, and you have always been a good servant, but this is too much.”

“The shameless sons of the West are not your servants. They do not love you....”

“No, but they work.”

“For nothing... They have no pride.

“They are the sons of dogs.”

“They earn their wages.... Your men, I keep out of charity!”

“Charity!” The Indian stepped back as if struck, and his hand, swung clear of the poncho, was lifted over his head as if in menace. Then it dropped and he strode to the door. But before opening it, he turned and spoke rapidly in Quichua, his eyes flaming. Then, throwing his poncho oyer his shoulder, he went out.

Maria-Teresa sat silent for a while, toying with her pencil.

“What did he say?” asked Dick.

“That he was going, and that I should never see him again.”

“He looked furious.”

“Oh, he is not dangerous. It is a way they have. He says he did everything he could to prevent the trouble.... He is a

good man himself, but his gang are hopeless. You have no idea what a nuisance these Indians are. Proud as Lucifer, and as lazy as drones.... I shall never employ another one."

"Wouldn't that make trouble?"

"It might! But what else can I do? I can't have all my coolies killed off like that."

"And what of Huascar?"

"He will do as he pleases.... He was brought up in the place, and was devoted to my mother."

"It must be hard for him to leave."

"I suppose so."

"And you wouldn't do anything to keep him?"

"No.... Goodness, we are forgetting all about your uncle!" She rang, and a man came in. "Order the motor.... By the way, what are the Indians doing?"

"They've left with Huascar."

"All of them?"

"Yes, señorita."

"Without saying a word?"

"Not a word, señorita."

"Who paid them off?"

"They refused to take any money. Huascar ordered them to."

"And what of the Island coolies?"

"They have not been near the place."

"But the dead man... and the wounded?"

"The Chinamen take them back to their own quarters."

"Funny people.... Tell them to bring the motor round."

While speaking she had put on a bonnet, and now drew on her gloves.

“I shall drive,” she said to the liveried negro boy who brought round the car.

As they shot toward the Muelle Darsena, Dick admired the coolness with which she took the machine through the twisting streets. The boy, crouching at their feet, was evidently used to the speed, and showed no terror as they grazed walls and corners.

“Do you do a great deal of motoring out here?”

“No, not very much. The roads are too bad. I always use this to get from Callao to Lima, and there are one or two runs to the seaside, to places like Ancon or Carillos—just a minute, Dick.”

She stopped the car, and waved her hand to a curly gray head which had appeared at a window, between two flower pots. This head reappeared at a low door, on the shoulders of a gallant old gentleman in sumptuous uniform. Maria-Teresa jumped out of the motor, exchanged a few sentences with him, and then rejoined Dick again.

“That was the Chief of Police,” she explained. “I told him about that affair. There will be no trouble unless the Chinamen take legal proceedings, which is not likely.”

They reached the steamers’ landing stage in time. The tugs had only just brought alongside the Pacific Steam Navigation Company’s liner, on board which Uncle Francis was still taking notes:—“On entering the port of Callao, one is struck, etc., etc.” He lost precious material by not being with Maria-Teresa as she enthusiastically descriRed “her harbor” to Dick.... Sixty millions spent in improvements... 50,000 square meters of docks.... How she loved it all for its commercial bustle, for its constant coming and going of

ships, for its intense life, and all it meant—the riches that would flow through it after the opening of the Panama Canal... the renascence of Peru.... Chili conquered and Santiago crushed... the defeat of 1878 avenged... and San Francisco yonder had best look to itself!

Dick, listening to the girl at his side, was amazed to hear her give figures with as much authority as an engineer, estimate profits as surely as, a shipowner. What a splendid little brain it was, and how much better than that imaginative, dreaming type which he deplored both in men and women, a type exemplified by his uncle with all his chimeric hypotheses.

“It would all be so splendid,” she added, frowning, “if we only stopped making fools of ourselves. But we are always doing it.”

“In what way?”

“With our revolutions!”

They were now standing on the quay, while the liner gradually swung in.

“Oh, are they at it here as well? We found one on in Venezuela, and then another at Guayaquil. The city was under martial law, and some general or other who had been in power for about forty-eight hours was preparing to march on Quito and wipe out the government.”

“Yes, it is like an epidemic,” went on the young girl, “an epidemic which is sweeping the Andes just now. The news from Boloisa is worrying me, too. Things are bad round Lake Titicaca.”

“Not really! That’s a nuisance... not a cheerful outlook for my business in the Cuzco.” Dick was evidently put out by

the news.

“I had not intended telling you about it until to-morrow. You must not think of unpleasant things to-day... all that district is in the hands of Garcia’s men now.”

“Who is Garcia?”

“Oh, one of my old suitors.”

“Has everybody in the country been in love with you, Maria-Teresa?”

“Well, I had the attraction of having been brought up abroad... at the first presidential ball I went to after mother’s death there was no getting rid of them.... Garcia was there. And now he has raised the revolt among the Arequipa and Cuzco Indians.... He wants Vointemilla’s place as president.”

“I suppose they have sent troops against them?”

“Oh, yes, the two armies are out there... but, of course, they are not fighting.”

“Why?”

“Because of the festival of the Interaymi.”

“And what on earth is that?”

“The Festival of the Sun.... You see, three quarters, of the troops on both sides are Indian.... So, of course, they get drunk together during the fêtes.... In the end, Garcia will be driven over the Boloisan border, but in the meantime he is playing the very mischief with fertilizer rates.”

She turned toward the liner again, and, catching sight of Uncle Francis, raised her hand in reply to the frantic waving of a notebook.

“How are you, Mr. Montgomery?” she cried. “Did you enjoy the crossing?”

The gangways were run out, and they went on board.

Mr. Montgomery’s first question was the same as had been his nephew’s.

“Well, and how is business?”

For all those who knew her in Europe had marveled at the change which had come over the “little girl” at her mother’s death, and her sudden determination to return to Peru and herself take charge of the family’s fertilizer business and concessions. She had also been influenced in this decision by the fact that there were her little brother and sister, Isabella and Christobal, who needed her care. And finally there was her father, perhaps the greatest child of the three, who had always royally spent the money which his wife’s business brought in.

Maria-Teresa’s mother, the daughter of a big Liverpool shipowner, met the handsome Marquis de la Torre one summer when he was an attaché at the Peruvian legation in London. The following winter she went back to Peru with him. Inheriting a great deal of her father’s business acumen, she made a great success of a guano concession which her husband had hitherto left unexploited.

At first the marquis protested vigorously that the wife of Christobal de la Torre should not work, but when he found that he could draw almost to any extent on an ever-replenishing exchequer, he forgave her for making him so wealthy. Yet on his wife’s death did he find it surprising that Maria-Teresa should have inherited her abilities, and allowed the daughter to take over all the duties which had been the mother’s.

“And where is your father, my dear?” asked Uncle Francis, still with a wary eye on his luggage.

“He did not expect to see you until to-morrow. They are going to give you such a reception! The whole Geographical Society is turning out in your honor.”

When his luggage had been taken to the station, and he had personally supervised its registration for Lima, Uncle Francis at last consented to take a seat in the motor, and Maria-Teresa put on full speed, for she wished to reach home before the early tropical nightfall.

After passing a line of adobe houses and a few comfortable villas, they came to a long stretch of marshy ground, overgrown with reeds and willows, and spotted with clumps of banana trees and tamarisks, with here and there an eucalyptus or an araucaria pine. The whole countryside was burnt yellow by the sun, by a drought hardly ever relieved by a drop of rain, and which makes the campo round Lima and Callao anything but enchanting. A little further along they passed some scattered bamboo and adobe huts.

This parched landscape would have been infinitely desolate had it not been relieved at intervals by the luxuriant growth surrounding some hacienda—sugar-cane, maize and rice plantations, making a brilliant green oasis round the white farm buildings. The badly-built clay roads which crossed the highway were peopled by droves of cattle, heavy carts, and flocks of sheep which mounted shepherds were bringing back to the farms. And all this animation formed a strange contrast to the arid aspect of the surrounding country. In spite of the jolting shaking of the car over a poorly kept road, Uncle Francis kept taking notes, and even more notes. Soon, with the lower spurs of the

Cordilleras, they saw on the horizon the spires and domes which make Lima look almost like a Mussulman city.

They were now running alongside the Rimac, a stream infested by crayfish. Negro fishermen were to be seen every few yards dragging behind them in the water sacks attached to their belts, and in which they threw their catch to keep it alive. Turning to comment on them, Dick noticed Maria-Teresa's preoccupied air, and asked her the cause.

"It is very strange," she said, "we have not met a single Indian."

The motor was almost in Lima now, having reached the famous Ciudad de los Reyes, the City of Kings founded by the Conquistador. Maria-Teresa, who loved her Lima, and wished to show it off, made a detour, swerving from the road and running a short distance along the stony bed of dried-up Rimac, careless of the risk to her tires.

Certainly the picturesque corner to which she brought them was worth the detour. The walls of the houses could hardly be seen, overgrown, as it were, with wooden galleries and balconies. Some of them were for all the world like finely carved boxes, adorned with a hundred arabesques—little rooms suspended in mid-air, with mysterious bars and trellised shutters, and strongly reminiscent of Peru or Bagdad. Only here it was not rare to see women's faces half hidden in the shadows, though in no way hiding. For the ladies of Lima are famed for their beauty and coquetry. They were to be seen here in the streets, wearing the manta, that fine black shawl which is wrapped round the head and shoulders and which no woman in South America uses with so much grace as the girl of Lima. Like the haik of the Mor,

the manta hides all but two great dark eyes, but its wearer can, when she wishes, throw it aside just enough to give a sweet glimpse of harmonious features and a complexion made even more white by the provoking shadow of the veil. Dick had this amply proved to him, and seemed so interested that Maria-Teresa began to scold.

“They are far too attractive in those mantas,” she said. “I shall show you some Europeans now.”

She turned the car up an adjoining street, which brought them to the new city, to broad roads and avenues opening up splendid vistas of the distant Andes. They crossed the Paseo Amancaes, which is the heart of the Mayfair of Lima, and Maria-Teresa several times exchanged bows with friends and acquaintances. Here the black manta was replaced by Paris hats overdressed from the rue de la Paix, for its discreet shadow is too discreet to be correct at nightfall. It was the hour at which all fashionable Lima was driving or walking, or gossiping in the tearooms, where one loiters happily over helados in an atmosphere of chiffons, flirting and politics. When they reached the Plaza Mayor, the first stars had risen on the horizon. The crowd was dense, and carriages advanced only at a walking pace. Women dressed as for the ball, with flowers in their dark curls, passed in open carriages. Young men grouped round a fountain in the center of the square, raised their hats and smiled into passing victorias.

“It really is strange,” murmured Maria-Teresa, “not an Indian in sight!”

“Do they generally come to this part of the city, then?”

“Yes, there are always some who come to watch the people come past....”

Standing in front of a café was a group of half-breeds, talking politics. One could distinctly hear the names of Garcia and Vointemilla, the president, neither of them treated over gently. One of the group, evidently a shopkeeper, was moaning his fears of a return to the era of pronunciamentos.

The car turned at the corner of the cathedral, and entered a rather narrow street. Seeing the way clear, Maria-Teresa put on speed only to pull up sharply a second later, just in time to avoid running down a man wrapped in a poncho, who stood motionless in the middle of the street. Both young people recognized him.

“Huascar!” exclaimed Maria-Teresa.

“Huascar, señorita, who begs you to take another road.”

“The road is free to all, Huascar. Stand aside.”

“Huascar has nothing more to say to the señorita. To pass, she must pass over Huascar.”

Dick half rose in his seat, as if to intervene, but Maria-Teresa put a hand on his sleeve.

“You behave very strangely, Huascar,” she said. “Why are there no Indians in the town to-day?”

“Huascar’s brethren do as they please, they are free men.”

She shrugged her shoulders, thought a moment, and began to turn the car round.

Before starting again, however, she spoke to the Indian, who had not moved.

“Are you always my friend, Huascar?”

For an answer, the Indian slowly raised his sombrero, and looked up to the early stars, as if calling them to witness. With a brief “Adios!” Maria-Teresa drove on.

When the motor stopped again, it was before a big house, the door-keeper of which rushed out to help his young mistress to alight. He was forestalled, however, by the Marquis de la Torre himself, who had just driven up, and who greeted the two Montgomerys with delight. “Enter, señor. This house is yours,” he said grandly to Uncle Francis.

The Marquis was a slim little gentleman of excessive smartness, dressed almost like a young man. When he moved and he was hardly ever still, he seemed to radiate brilliancy: from his eyes, his clothes, his jewels. But for all that, he was never undignified, and kept his grand manner without losing his vivacity in circumstances when others would have had to arm themselves with severity. Outside his club and the study of geographical questions he cared for nothing so much as romping with his son Christobal, a sturdy youngster of seven. At times one might have taken them for playmates on a holiday from the same school, filling the house with their noise, while little Isabella, who was nearly six, and loved ceremony, scolded them pompously, after the manner of an Infanta.

III

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The Marquis de la Torre's residence was half modern, half historical, with here and there quaint old-fashioned rooms and corners. Don Christobal was something of a collector, and had adorned his home with ancient paneling, carved galleries several centuries old, rude furniture dating back to before the conquest, faded tapestry—all so many relics of the various towns of old Peru which his ancestors had first sacked and then peopled. And each object recalled some anecdote or Story which the host detailed at length to all willing listeners.

It was in one of these historical corners that Mr. Montgomery and his nephew were presented to two old ladies—two Velasquez canvases brought to life, yet striving to retain all their pictorial dignity. Attired after a fashion long since forgotten, Aunt Agnes and her duenna might almost have been taken for antiques of Don Christobal's collection: they lived altogether in another age, and their happiest moments were those passed in telling fear-inspiring legends. All the tales of old Peru had a home in this ancient room of theirs, and many an evening had been whiled away there by these narratives—the two Christobals, father and son, and little Infanta Isabella listening in one corner, while Maria-Teresa, at the other end of the room, went over her accounts and wrote her letters in a great splash of yellow lamplight.

Uncle Francis was delighted to meet in real life two such perfect types of the New Spain of yore, set in the very frame