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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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THE CRUISE OF THE VEGA

By **LIEUTENANT EDGAR GARDINER**

I HAVE been told a hundred times or more that the story, *The Cruise of the Vega*, has set a new high mark in romantic historical novels, that it bears the deft, sure touch of a master, and that it

transports the reader to the time and the place of the Conquistador heroes as never such a tale had done before. Perhaps even more often I have been complimented on the accuracy with which I followed that recently dis-

covered account that had lain buried in the Spanish archives, to be finally exhumed almost simultaneously with that great story. It has been a source of amazement to the historians that I boldly discarded all of their preconceived thoughts of the Conquest; that I disregarded those inaccuracies completely and struck boldly out in an entirely unexpected direction.

They have asserted that I must have been the first to read that hitherto unknown manuscript and base my story on it alone; they point out that even the names of the gentlemen-at-arms are retained in the story with commendable accuracy.

I am but now come from a dinner given in honor of this newest literary and historical prodigy which is myself, where I listened again to fulsome praise and adroit questions. Where did I obtain my heroes? Why did the great galleon, *Vega*, strike out due north instead of northwesterly, and so land in an entirely unsuspected quarter? And above all, where did I obtain my remarkable knowledge of the customs and dress and habits of that far-off time? of Indians as well as Spanish grandees? True, of the Indians no vestige now remains; they and their customs have long since gone to the limbo of forgotten things; but much of what I had written so sympathetically and withal so authoritatively was borne out by vestigial fragments found in the scanty narratives of the time.

The ladies have surrounded me eagerly, to talk of my Don Sebastian and of that wonder princess, to talk of my little Miguel whose downward path was such a poignant sorrow, yet who redeemed himself so magnificently in the end.

Yet I have steadfastly declined to enter into controversy, to explain, to talk in any way upon that monumental work; and for that I have been praised all undeservedly. My interviewers have written columns about my unassuming modesty, my

poise; the thousand and one bits of tittle-tattle that envelop the great and the near-great. They have used countless columns in speculation as to the next great thing that may be expected from my pen, while I sit as mute and inscrutable as the Sphinx.

But I will talk tonight; indeed, I must talk or else go mad. I must tell the bald truth, incredible as it may seem; and tomorrow, when all the world shall know, then perhaps someone may rise who can explain and, explaining, relieve me of my doubts and fears and worries.

If I have not spoken about *The Cruise of the Vega*, it is not because I did not wish to do so. When all the world was reading it and talking of it, wondering, arguing, questioning, I wanted to do likewise—I, whose name appeared in gold lettering beneath its title on the gaudy, soul-stirring illustrated cover. Yet I was the one man who could not question and exclaim; my questions must be forever stifled, for I was its author. The gods on high must laugh at that, even as the world will do tomorrow! But I must make haste and write lest my courage fail me even now.

I need not weary you again with the story of my early beginnings when I studied till far into the night, ambitious to master the writer's art. Nor need I tell you of those early failures when each story came back to me like a homing pigeon times without number, and I faced the fact that such a craft was not for me. That has been told and retold in all its myriad changes by interviewers who seized upon the little they could find and magnified it out of all proportion. No; I shall tell the tale of *The Cruise of the Vega*, and you who read this shall judge its worth.

IT WAS in that hour of deepest despondency, when I knew myself for what I was, an utter failure, that it first came to me. Night after night I tossed sleeplessly; day after day I

wrote interminably, only to tear up all that I had written and cast the fragments aside. Well might I be desperate as I saw myself sinking inescapably into the quagmire of mediocrity.

Came the fateful night when before my sleepless eyes I saw the warm brown walls and spires of that wonder city gleaming above the waving jungle greens; saw the proud Armada of mighty Spain bowing, dipping, swinging before its crescent of white beach. Like a brilliant-colored motion-picture the scene unrolled vividly before me. Oh, for the pen of a master to write down what I saw there! But, alas! I was only a bungler!

Night after night I saw that panorama unroll before me until I began to look for its appearance, even as I looked for my long periods of sleeplessness. And night after night I rose in desperation, to sit at my desk trying to put it all down on the bald white paper, only to compare my poor weak efforts with the brilliant pageantry of the original and grow more despondent than ever.

At last came a night when even the gorgeous vision failed me, and I sat in sleepless misery over my desk with the blank, lifeless paper before me. Oh, that I might see those bare white sheets glow with the life and color of my dreams, I thought, as I dropped my burning face upon my arms and pulled my dressing-gown the closer against the night's damp chill! I must have dropped asleep at last, there before my desk; for I awoke only when the birds in the trees without began their praise of a new-born day. Wearily I arose and stretched my cramped, aching limbs. The glories of that new day had no joys for me. I saw only a drab, dull vista of another failure ahead. Idly I picked up the scattered sheets, the litter of blunted pencils. Had I then, after all, written through the night just passed? But no; that

could not be, else I should have remembered it. Anxiously I looked over those scattered sheets that I was gathering up—more food for the ravening maw of the ever-yawning waste-basket.

I read the page; with quickened interest I found the next, then feverishly went through the entire dozen. I had never seen that fine, neat script before; certes, it was altogether unlike my own coarse, angular scrawl; but I was in no mood to ponder upon such trifles as these, for before my delighted eyes glowed that wonder that had recurred to me so often; in all its glowing color and life the mighty Armada and the gleaming battlements of the Spanish Main were passing before me.

Yes, and more! Woven throughout its warp and woof was a tale as precious as old wine; that stirred my blood: a tale to quicken the pulse of young and old alike! Though I could not write, yet I knew a master tale when I read it, and here was a story that only a Sabatini could write! And then my heart sank like lead: the story was incomplete; it stopped short in mid-stride!

Half the day I sat there, trying desperately to pick up that broken thread, to bring the story to a triumphant conclusion, only to cast each halting, futile effort into the ever-ready basket at my feet. I tossed my latest bit disconsolately aside as the afternoon shadows lengthened and acknowledged utter failure.

Yet I could not bring myself to cast that beginning after the abortive efforts of the day. Might I not catch the thread once more after typing the precious sheets, I wondered? Obedient to the impulse, I drew the aged, battered machine forth and painstakingly ground out the dozen sheets; but it was no use: I was as hopeless as before.

The hours slipped by unnoticed while I toiled desperately but ever

more hopelessly, writing feverishly, only to cast my efforts aside with a groan, then try again with no better result. Midnight chimed from the darkened village before I gave it up and sought my bed.

Again a new day flamed in the east and again it found me cramped and shivering before my desk, chilled to the bone in spite of my warm dressing-gown that had once been an Indian blanket of a weave now seldom seen. And again my dazed eyes took in the litter of dulled pencils and scattered sheets that bore the same fine, careful hand I had seen once before. And again my heart flamed with delight as I read further of that epic tale.

Once more I typed those closely written sheets, nor did I try this time to aid by my poor weak efforts its unfinished end. When that task was done I walked alone in the cool green woods with a curiously uplifted heart. Something within me gave me cheer for the first time in months; something assured me that on the morrow I should find another heap of manuscript and a furtherance of that tale that so enthralled me.

And so, from day to day, from night to night, I slaved, the servant of an unknown, the unconscious, uncomprehending pawn of I knew not what destiny, and with each new sun the sheaf of typewritten manuscript in the locked bottom drawer of my desk grew ever larger and more absorbing until the day came when it was finished; all save the title, for title it had none, nor foreword, nor author. There it lay for weeks while I thrashed out in my mind what course to pursue.

I knew the tale was worthy of the highest in the printer's art. Were it published it would flame meteor-like across the literary world—the crowning triumph of a master. But dare I publish it? And if I did, whose the name it should bear? Surely,

not mine, for I was but the typist who copied endlessly the work of one far greater than myself.

With fear and trembling, I sent it out at last, adding to it only the title which it bears, and speedily I heard from it again. It was accepted with delight. From the thin envelope of acceptance fell a check that made me gasp, and within a few short weeks I was famous. Though I had signed no name to that bulky manuscript, yet the publishers had put my name beneath the title.

That first check I banked at once and each succeeding check of the mounting royalties went the way of the first, nor did I touch that money, for it was not mine, any more than the book was mine.

If I have not commented on *The Cruise of the Vega*, it has been that I did not care to criticize the work of another, and that one a master such as I can never be. Yet my heart is like a stone within my bosom. At the bank under my own name lies a sum that belongs to the unknown who nightly wrote at my humble desk. Who he may be I can not guess. Is that neat fine script that I transcribed a very record of truth, indeed? Was it the disembodied spirit of one of those Conquistadores come back at this late date to write by my hand his memories of that unforgettable trip with a vividness and a color that we of a later age may not hope to equal, much less surpass? If not such an one, who then? Alas! I do not know. Perhaps this side of the Great Adventure I may never know.

The literary world is agog with speculation. What will be the next great thing to come from my pen? What will be the next from one who has shown such artistry and mastery of that romantic age? My pen, indeed! Will there be a next? Or does that unseen, unknown now lie forever mute?