

CHAPTER XXV.

WEDDED BY DECREE.

SCARCE a week after this, comes to the village Don Ulah Pico, the judge of the province, in considerable state, accompanied by his *aguacils* and clerks, likewise one or two notaries, solicitors, *pica-pleitos*, *procuradores* and other judicial hangers-on, all hoping to get a little picking out of these big tobacco lands.

With him journeys El Corregidor and his friend Herr Ludenbaum, the German merchant.

So, due proclamation being made, and various legal forms that give solemnity to Spanish injustice being gone through, the case which is entitled: *Don Silas Salem Gordon, Executor of the Estate of Luisa Areles Gordon, versus the Brotherhood of St. Domingo* is called for trial in the *tribunal*, a stone building which is used for the municipal gatherings of the little *pueblo*. Like most government buildings in the interior of Luzon, it has a roof of nipa and the meeting-place on the second story is fronted by a bamboo balcony with stairway leading to it.

It is a bright April day, the siesta hour has finished, the sun has passed its heat. After the usual preliminaries which have occupied the morning hours of justice, the name of Doña Maud Ysabel Gordon being called at the door of the *tribunal*, that young lady is ushered up the steps to the veranda from which she steps into the little court-room, a place of rough unfinished walls and bare hardwood floor, upon which is placed a little platform for the judge, with the only armchair in the town upon it; below this is the clerk's seat and table, and a promiscuous lot of rocking-chairs and bamboo settees for the lawyers, though the all-pervading game cock, who wanders in through open doors and flies in through open windows *ad libitum* during the trial claims at his convenience all furniture to roost upon.

Under the charge of Matron Dolgo, Miss Gordon has been brought here to give her testimony, her sister

being left carefully under guard at the little cottage. His Honor Don Ulah Pico affecting to fear some collusion between the two fair witnesses.

Passing in review before a few Indian children who gaze from across the dusty road at the *Castila* lady, the beautiful girl is received almost at the portals of injustice, with Spanish suavity and German effusiveness; Herr Ludenbaum shaking her by the hand and half attempting to put papa's kiss upon her brow, whispering: "*Wie geht's!*" So happy to see *mein leedle fraulein*. You, I hope, have been well in this expansive, though retired, spot."

As he speaks, he is searching in the lovely face for an expression that will show the proud spirit of Maud Gordon has been sufficiently broken by her confinement to accept the fate he is about to offer her. In this Herr Max is woefully disappointed; as the bearing of the girl though anxious, is as full of courage as it is of beauty; a kind of radiant nervous light flickering in her bright blue eyes.

Whatever her danger, she will soon be face to face with it!

The Corregidor, in his suave way, salutes the witness's pretty fingers, and even Judge Don Ulah Pico beams kindly upon his victim and hopes she has enjoyed her residence at Carranglan. The lawyers also make quite an ado over this young lady; though Maud, as she looks about the court, sees but very few faces she knows in this, the home of her childhood, for most of the country people do not dare to be present at judicial proceedings fearing summonses as witnesses, collection of taxes, and other misfortunes that go with the law.

Still she notes in the rear of the room among the few peasant and Indian lookers-on a Chinese pedler. Sitting behind these, a kindly glance of salutation upon his clear-cut face, is El Capitan Chaco who, divested of his sword in deference to judicial form, has stalked in like a medieval shadow to view a suit that now interests him greatly; for this Spanish warrior of bright eyes and bristling black mustachios, has hopes that the *Señorita* just about to step upon the witness stand may become in all her beauty his *cara esposa*, and that some day when she wins her suit—which he has

made up his mind she shall—bring her portion of this goodly heritage to him as her dower.

But Spanish law has this day some wild surprises for Captain Chaco as well as the young lady upon whom he gazes, who stands robed in white, for Miss Gordon doesn't dare to show, by wearing the trappings of mourning, that she has already received news of her father's death, save by the little black band upon her wrist in tribute to his memory.

Then being called to the witness stand; looking like a dream of beauty, a nervous excitement giving vivacity and radiance to her bright eyes, Maud Gordon taking the Bible in her hand and pressing the cross upon its cover to her lips, makes hostage to justice, and takes her oath, wondering what questions will be put to her on matters that must have happened when she was a child, her dear mother having died not long after Mazie's birth.

But her answer to the very first question of the *procurador* produces a little sensation in the court, though curiously enough the judge, who is a pompous gentleman of many words and Latin phrases and entirely the tool of the powers above him, doesn't seem surprised.

"Your name, Señorita?" asks the lawyer for the crown officers.

"Maud Ysabel Gordon, daughter of the late—" the word has slipped from her—"Silas Salem Gordon."

"You suggest your father is dead?"

"I have heard so." Here Maud notes El Corregidor and Ludenbaum cast eyes upon each other astonished at her knowledge.

"You are a subject of Spain?" asks the *procurador* in careless commonplace.

The answer that comes startles this legal gentleman. "I am a citizen of the United States of America!" says the witness in clear impressive voice.

"What?" gasps the attorney.

"These papers," Maud produces the documents, "prove that I became by naturalization a citizen of the United States of America in the year eighteen hundred and ninety-six. Here is my certificate of citizenship signed by Judge Norton Noble of Topeka, Kansas. It is certified to by a notary public of that

place, likewise that my name is upon the voting list of the first precinct of the second ward of that city. In addition I have a certification that I voted at the municipal election held in that place. As a citizen of the United States I give my evidence!"

The girl utters this in clear impressive dominant voice, and gazing about defiant, notes that the lawyers opposed to her father's claim have apparently been warned to expect this; but that Capitan Roberto Chaco who hates America with Spanish military hate, has an awful frown upon his clear cut face and his hand has abstractedly sought his absent sword.

"Is there an interpreter here who can translate from the American language this written rigmarole into the Spanish tongue?" asks the judge testily.

None being brought forward or found, Maud Gordon says simply: "Your Honor, I will translate to you. You can swear me as interpreter if you like."

"That's unnecessary," interrupts the attorney for Spain. "In the first place, these papers can't be legal. No woman can transfer her citizenship. In the second place, I have documents here to prove that this lady was incapable of becoming of her own volition a citizen of the United States of America, or any other foreign country."

"Incapable! How?" asks the witness turning fiery eyes upon him.

"Maud Ysabel Gordon was at the time, eighteen hundred and ninety-six, and had already been for six years previous thereto, a wife by the holy ceremony of the Church, espoused and wedded to Herr Adolph Max Ludenbaum!"

"My God! This is a faint breath of shuddering horror from the proclaimed bride.

"Said Ludenbaum being a resident of this province at the time of the ceremony," goes on the attorney in legal monotone, "which was performed in this district and bears the signature of the Cura of this Parish, of Carranglan."

But suddenly interrupting this, the lawyer cries: "Look to the witness!" for Señorita Gordon has reeled and staggered from the stand and sank upon a chair, her face white as the chalk-washed walls of the building.

But Maud Gordon though stricken by this lightning bolt, has too brave a spirit for it to leave her body defenseless in this, the almost supreme moment of her life—the greater one came afterwards.

She staggers back to the witness stand and gasps: "Under—under my oath—that is *false!* No vows of marriage from my lips to any man have ever passed them, least of all to Adolph Max Ludenbaum."

"Then the Señorita's *legal* status must be determined before the witness gives any further evidence," ordains the judge from the bench.

And now to the fluttering horror and blushing torment of this agonized girl, the trial becomes, *not* the trial of the *titulo real* of lands in Nueva Ecija, but the trial of the fact whether Señorita Maud Ysabel Gordon on the fourteenth day of September, eighteen hundred and ninety, became, by ceremony of the Church, the wife of Adolph Max Ludenbaum.

Upon this, evidence is taken, the Cura's certificate being read, and his signature admitted to be correct, which is true, as the document is a genuine one. For Herr Ludenbaum was too brilliant to be caught napping in such a little thing, and had obtained an old certificate of marriage from the records of the province in the custody of El Corregidor. With the names in it carefully changed to Ludenbaum's and that of Maud Ysabel Gordon, the old timeworn paper seems genuine and true.

"This certificate is a lie. I swear it by the hope of God!" mutters Maud, looking in dazed horror at the document.

"Then let Fra Roderigo Anselmo, the Cura who gave it, be summoned," remarks the judge suavely. "This is his parish."

"The Cura is dead!" answers the clerk of the court.

Upon this, breaks in the hoarse voice of Roberto Chaco. "Poor Fra Roderigo Anselmo was larded with cocoanut oil and burned in his ruined convent over a year ago by an insurgent band under Del Pila. He can give no evidence. Put me on the witness stand, Honored Judge, I can tell you if this lying affair is genuine; which I think it isn't!" cries the captain, thinking he is doing the half swooning beauty that he loves a favor.

But he is not!

For El Corregidor acting as officer of the court, suggests: "Probably you, Captain Chaco, can testify to his signature as you knew the dear old Padre."

"*Dios mio*, I can! Let me look at the absurd thing that the señorita denies so truly," mutters Roberto savagely.

But on the witness stand, after he has taken his oath very reverently, his face grows white as he glances at the paper, and from it glares at Maud, thinking she has deceived him into loving her, even when bride to another.

Then, being a devout follower of the Church, and as such hating perjury, the Captain gives his evidence to the despairing horror of the girl, who is now bewildered with astonishment: "I know this is Fra Roderigo Anselmo's signature. I was acquainted with that devout man and his handwriting very well. The Padre would certify to no falsehood. He was a true priest of the Church." Having said this in curt military tones, though his tongue at times seems to choke him, the medieval soldier kisses the cross on the certificate of marriage, and, bowing to the judge, leaves the witness stand.

In two strides he is beside Maud Gordon, and uttering, in his simple soldier way, words that strike her with despair: "Doña Ludenbaum——"

"No, no!" she starts up, screaming at the title.

"Here are your marriage lines," he says in ringing voice, "keep them to show you are an honest woman!" then whispers in her ear: "Display them to prevent honest men having aught to do with you."

With this, tossing the paper before the clerk, an awful scowl upon his scarred face and a brain driven nigh to madness by the thought that this beauty he had hoped would soon be his, has been and is the property of another man, this sixteenth century martial Spanish lover strides from the court-room, his heavy cavalry boots sounding very heavy on the hard wood steps.

Gazing at Don Roberto's bowed head Maud knows her last friend has left her; then shudders as with the ague as more testimony that she is wife to Ludenbaum is piled upon her, till she almost thinks herself crazy and doubts her own memory.

Don Rafaél Lozado being called as official of the province, testifies not only that this document is taken properly from the records, but that he was present at the ceremony, and signed his name as witness to it eight years ago.

Which evidence is curiously true, yet wholly a lie. Don Rafaél did see the marriage of a certain Eulalie Vicente and a certain Ricardo Marcho, whose names have been erased. "You can see, Your Honor," he remarks suavely, "that the document is very old, the ink upon the signature of equal age, and the whole a *prima facie* honest record of the province."

Under such evidence as this, Maud's face grows paler, paler, till it is white as that of a dead woman's, and she gasps in broken sentences: "I demand to be placed upon the witness-stand to again deny that I am the wife of any man!" then suddenly cries: "Fourteenth of September eighteen ninety! I remember that day—I——"

"Aha," murmurs the attorney, "you recollect at last, Señora, that you became the wife of the gentleman named in the document."

"No, I remember——"

"What?"

"Nothing!" murmurs the girl. But she has recollected that on that very day she became a member of the Katipunan. "I only remember that I never in the presence of the Church, or in the presence of any man, or in the presence of that liar," her finger points to El Corregidor, "promised to be the spouse of any one, much less of that devil there who claims me for his wife." She is gazing at Herr Ludenbaum.

But even as she looks at the German's face and catches his eyes that meet hers with a mocking smile of triumph and gloating glance of legal possession; even as she speaks the word "*wife*," over the girl's face, neck and shoulders flies a blush red as the fires of the Inferno.

"Is this all you have to say, Doña Ludenbaum?"

"My God! Don't call me that!"

"You have nothing more to say?"

"Yes, I have. No decree of court, this or any other, can make me wife to any man!"

At this implied insult to his power the judge shakes his head reprovingly, and murmurs: "The court

simply decrees that you, Doña Ludenbaum, cannot give your evidence in the case as Señorita Gordon, which you are not. Still it would add its authority to that of Mother Church, who has already proclaimed you spouse by your own vows to your husband Adolph Max Ludenbaum. As such the court now decrees you to him, giving him the rights and authority of a husband over you, who have apparently for eight years forgotten your vows or disregarded them. As such this tribunal grants him possession of your property and power over your person to hold as his wife according to Spanish custom."

"*Dios mio*, rather doom me to death!" moans the bride.

At this outburst, most of the spectators look astounded, and Judge Pico remarks sagely: "It is not so bad a thing for a girl to have a good husband. I have a daughter; I would I could condemn her to so pleasant a fate. She'd also much prefer that, to being a nun."

Then he goes cheerfully on: "Oh no, we respect beauty too much to place any higher penalty upon you than that of being a good and loving wife to a gentleman we have no doubt will be a good husband to you, and as such has shown his consideration for you by respecting your tender years when you became his bride."

His Honor glances at the girl's face, that is red as fire and continues facetiously: "A self-control that, looking at your marvelous loveliness, my child, makes me think Herr Ludenbaum nigh unto a monk!"

At this there is a little subdued snicker and one or two guffaws by attendant *procuradors*, *pica-pleitos*, clerks and hangers-on; a judge's jokes are always laughed at.

"Do you mean officially," asks the girl in low and choking voice, "to brand me as that man's wife on those lying papers?"

"Such is your legal standing in this case!" remarks His Honor suavely. "Go to your husband, Doña Ludenbaum."

A moment after some lawyers whispering a few words to him, Don Ulah Pico of the unsullied ermine announces: "No further evidence can be received in

this action, which has been terminated by the death of the late Don Silas Salem Gordon, of which I have just been *legally* informed; and that Herr Adolph Max Ludenbaum is now suing as the executor of the estate and guardian of the minor daughter, for your rights Doña Ysabel Ludenbaum as his wife and your sister's as his ward."

But Doña Ludenbaum answers nothing to this; she has been stricken down by the awful decree of marriage.

In a kind of half daze, half swoon, Matron Dolgo having to bring water and fan her face, Maud hears the attorney for her putative husband make statement to the court that his client as executor of the estate of the late Don Silas Salem Gordon and as husband of the eldest daughter of the late Señora Luisa Areles Gordon, deceased, of Señorita Mazie Inez, a minor, who is not present in court, but will be soon brought in, has made compromise with the attorneys of the Spanish Crown, and for certain considerations will receive deed to the estate for the two young ladies in question.

All this with legal phrasings takes some little time, and seems almost a nightmare to the new-made bride who is so stung with chagrin and tormented by shame she can't look human being in the face, and gazes in a dazed way at a big rooster outside the window, pluming himself on a neighboring lime tree; for Ludenbaum, to complete his signature of the papers, is now solemnly swearing before the notary that he is the husband of the despairing girl both by Church forms as well as court decree.

He is also explaining with brutal cunning that the marriage was not announced nor consummated at its date, as the bride feared her father's opposition, she being of such tender years; that now her repugnance to acknowledging the union is because she became enamored with some Naval officer in America. This lying oath and dastard insinuation wracks the putative bride with rage so that the room spins round before her burning eyes.

And now, as if she were in a trance, Maud thinks she sees into this panjandrum of misery and despair, mixed with lawyer's terms and Latin axioms, dominated now and then by the crowing of game cocks in the dusty air outside, a tall German lady of gaunt figure and strong

face with spectacled eyes and thin, bloodless, cold, dogmatic lips, clad in a prim but European robe, lead in Mazie, who seems almost a child in simple frock of *jusi* cloth with her brown hair braided into a pigtail down her back and tied with white ribbons in adolescent style.

To her floats the German woman's voice saying sharply to her sister: "Answer His Honor's questions, child!"

To these Mazie seems to reply in an embarrassed way, there being indignant tears in her bright eyes as she greets her childish pigtail, and juvenile costume with a blush, and listens to Herr Ludenbaum introduce to the court the German woman as Frau Amelia Smoltz, a lady of high learning he has brought with great expense from Batavia, Java, to complete the education of his young ward.

Also, Maud seems to hear Mazie cry to Adolph: "You shall not take me from my sister!" and the German woman answer sternly: "Your guardian, child, has now full charge of you!"

A moment later, with a start, Miss Gordon seems to awake from the half syncope into which the joy of being made so suddenly a bride has thrown her. Matron Dolgo is tapping her on the shoulder and saying, "His Honor has announced that the litigation being finished you are transferred from control of the court to that of your husband, Doña Ludenbaum." She staggers to her feet and unheeding the bows of the judge and the lawyers about him, falters to the door of the court-room.

Looking out she sees a barouche drawn by two sturdy ponies moving away along the dusty road, in it the German woman and her sister, who seems to be half disputing, half struggling with the governante.

Maud is turning helplessly back; but pauses, chancing to hear words coming from the lower story under the bamboo balcony on which she stands.

Ludenbaum and El Corregidor are in consultation. The girl's light footsteps have not been heard by these gentlemen whose voices appear excited, yet triumphant.

Don Rafaél is saying: "I charge you, my dear friend, forget not your promise to me."

"Don't doubt me, Don Rafaél, I shall remember your fidelity in this case. *Mein Gott!* Didn't dot mar-

riage evidence and decree smash all Yankee citizenship out of her."

"You can thank me for that," murmurs El Corregidor. "I give you a bride; now it is your turn to do the same for me."

"Of course, I will! You can bet your Spanish head within the month Frau Smoltz will have made things so unpleasant for that little vixen—I beg your pardon, little beauty—struggling with her there, that Fraulein Mazie will be glad to marry the devil himself to get away from her. Consider her your betrothed now. I as guardian give you the privilege. Within der month der leedle fraulein weds you, mein esteemed frendt."

"A-a-ah, *amigo de mi alma!*" cries Don Rafaél with Latin enthusiasm, and seizing the German, kisses his two fat cheeks.

With this the daze in the girl's mind seems to clear like mist before the sun. Maud knows the plot of which she is the victim. She has been brought to these wilds ostensibly as a witness, to be adjudged the wife of Ludenbaum and given helpless to him. Likewise her sister is turned over to his authority to be forced to wed El Corregidor.

As he comes up the steps from interview with Don Rafaél Lozado, Ludenbaum, humming a merry air, chancing to raise his eyes, catches glimpse of two of the prettiest feet and ankles in the world. Above them, drooping against the bamboo railing which her white hands clutch desperately, is a girl whose cheeks are one second pale as marble, the next red as the crimson skies of sunset, with two bright stars for eyes that shine through mists of unshed tears. But blushing or pallid she is beautiful enough to make him ready to lose his soul to be her spouse.

This vision of loveliness is his legal bride awaiting him under the nipa roof of the balcony outside the court-room.

For a moment the German measures his victim with his eye. Her attitude is emotional and Latin in its abandon, as if all hope had left her. He thinks quite merrily: "*Sapristi!* I'll soon crush the gaudy wings of this rebellious butterfly that has been given by the law into my grip."

They are quite alone; judge, lawyers and nearly all

inside, now that the court has adjourned, have got to discussing eagerly, almost savagely, the chances of the various game-cocks that compete in a grand series of combats given in Don Ulah Pico's honor this evening by the *alcaldé*. Their noise in proclaiming the merits of *putis*, *pulas* and *talisain* chanticleers, drown the low whispered tones of the interview upon the portico.

"*Ladron*, you're taking my sister from me!" cries Maud, an agony in her voice.

"My duty as her guardian," answers the German, the calm of victory in his voice, as he knocks off the ashes from his cigar.

"*Madre de Dios!* That woman is going to be cruel to Mazie!"

"You can determine dat for yourself."

"How?"

"By coming into mein house."

"Think how that would compromise me *now!*"

"Compromise you?" guffaws the German. "*Donnerwetter*, a wife compromised by going to a husband's home, a husband's love."

"And to my face you dare use that title?"

"*Mein Himmel!* I only echoes der decree of der court and der certificate of Fra Roderigo Anselmo."

"You will proclaim this accursed lie to the world?"

"*Donner und blitzen*, why not?"

"My God!" breaks out the girl, "the man who has my love, to whom I have promised my hand!"

"Oh, Herr Philip Marston, that accursed Yankee naval officer," mutters Ludenbaum savagely, rolling out an under-breath German oath.

"*Dios mio!* He'll think me untrue to him! He'll believe me worse than faithless to my vows and his love! He'll—he'll *hear* of it!"

"He *has* heard of it!"

"Oh mercy! How?" The bride is reeling before the legal husband.

"Like most Americans, dis Marston reads der papers. Doubtless dat meddling Englishman Curzon has sent him der *Diario de Manila* with dis item." As he speaks, the German nonchalantly shoves before his bride's haggard eyes a clipping of the paper similar to that which tortured Phil Marston in far-away Hong Kong.

"Oh God of Heaven, he'll—he'll think I am worse than untrue!"

"*Verdammt!* he'll know you are my wife, and, as is proper, keep away from mein threshold."

"*Santo Dios!* You have stolen from me not only his love but his respect!" shivers the girl, a kind of ague in her limbs. "You have robbed me both of my sister and affianced."

"You can have your sister, and der authority over her in mein house of mein wife."

"No, no!"

"It is your only chance to see your sister. Think what you may save leedle Fraulein Mazie. German governesses are sometimes strong and strict. Frau Smoltz when she drove away looked stern as an executioner," chuckles Adolph, though the face of the girl he mocks would make any man pity Bully Gordon's daughter save ex-Cabin-boy Max who is now avenging the rope's-end.

"Thank you for making my sister's fate depend on me!" cries the girl, a sudden ring in her voice astounding the German. The pleading Southern emotional attitude of his victim seems to change; her form grows erect; her eyes lose their pathos, the tears burn up in them. In a flash they become two stars of blue burnished steel. With Anglo-Saxon decision and American determination, she cries: "*I come!*"

"*Mein Gott, AS MY WIFE?* Adolph's eyes are lighting up with passion. His hands are outstretched to her. Then catching the shrinking of the girl's form and a repugnant horror in her face she cannot veil, his voice grows stern, he mutters: "You come no other way!"

"STILL, I COME!"

"Aha, *Gott, Himmel! Donnerwetter!*" This is a cry of triumph from the Prussian. His face is flaming with a tyrant love. With eager astonishment in his voice he suddenly asks: "Why?"

The girl answers, her cheeks pale as death save where two hectic spots burn like fire: "FOR REVENGE!"

Despite herself the words have slipped from her.

"For revenge?" echoes the Prussian with an astounded guffaw. "*Donner und Blüten for revenge!*"

Oho, dat is a good joke, mein *lieblich!*" Then he chuckles grimly, "Come! Bridegroom Ludenbaum wants you *mein frau*, FOR REVENGE!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

INTO THE LION'S MOUTH.

WITH triumphant bearing, the jovial German turns from her and, running into the court-room, cries in his excited Teutonic way: "*Donnerwetter, Herr Gott, Himmel!* Your Honor, *procuradores*, friends, *mein schatz* accepts the verdict with wifely obedience. You shall drink at my plantation this evening the health of bride and groom. *Verflucht!* she has acknowledged she has done me a cruel wrong eight years ago; but I am magnanimous. I forgive her. I take her to my heart."

Listening to her new-made lord and master, his victim on the veranda mutters these curious words: "God be praised, that demon is making me as remorseless as he is!" She casts one sharp, searching glance at the barracks on the neighboring hillside, and from now on all Latin emotion seems to leave her.

Coming back with his friends Ludenbaum finds a brisk Yankee bride with quick actions and direct but perchance coquettish American speech.

Maud is no more the maiden of the tropics, but the girl of her father's blood and land, as they all stroll out on the veranda, and God of Heaven! congratulate her. The judge kisses her hand and wishes Doña Ludenbaum a happy wedded life; for this sapient old jurist believes he has done a very good thing for the girl, and has no doubt of the genuineness of the certificate of marriage upon which he has ruled.

To his compliments the bride replies quite prettily, and makes a little plea to this great man: "Dear Don Ulah, can I have my marriage lines?"

"*Cierto*, my child!" and the judge orders the clerk to deliver to her the original certificate with Fra Roderigo Anselmo's signature, that official having already made a certified copy of same.

With this accursed thing in her grip, looking at the