

# Cutlass Empire. . . . By F. Van Wyck Mason

Synopsis: Harry Morgan has accomplished the great feat of arms the world thought impossible. He has marched his buccannery across the isthmus to take the City of Panama. Meanwhile the Spanish girl, Mercedes, has been released from prison Morgan's friend David Armitage. At the moment the whole city is on fire.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE  
Dismayed at the threatened destruction of what he intended one day, should serve as a vital British port on the Southern Sea, and furious over the prospect of losing so much wealth, Morgan astride a big red stallion, galloped first to one point then to another, all the while hurling terrifying threats at the enslaved populace.

He directed the bone-weary Army of Jamaica to blow up this row of houses and to pull down that row of shacks. Despite all efforts, great, spark-laden billows of flame rolled over the doomed city until, by sunset, they had engulfed nearly the whole of it. Utterly destroyed were palaces, sumptuous villas and church properties.

David Armitage lying, still quite helpless, among the privateer wounded hastily collected in the Convent of la Merced, one of the few big buildings spared by the fire, could see dozens of patients hideously marked by fire. By 10 of the morning, the conflagration had been resolved, leaving a wide and desolated area of smoking embers, of broken and tumbled walls.

"Please to come quickly," Barre came running up. "Odds blood, Charles, what more's gone wrong?" The secretary hesitated, glanced aside. "Why, why, it's Cap'n Jackman."

"What's amiss? Damn it, will you speak up?" "Why, during the fire last night—seems some Spaniard stabbed him and left him to die in a little stable where he was found only now. Please, ye'd best come quick, he's damned near sped."

The onlookers fell back in silence when Morgan swung himself from his horse and ran over to stand staring down upon that

lanky figure on the mattress. "Enoch, old comrade, can you hear me?" Morgan begged, taking his friend's hand. Eyes streaming, Morgan dropped onto both knees and wrung his hands. "Oh, Enoch! Enoch! Don't go!"

Then over his shoulder he thundered at the witnesses. "Why had he to perish like this, in the hour of our greatest triumph? Ah—I'll make the bloody Dona squelch this!"

"Ah, Harry!" The Admiral bent low to catch the elusive accents. "My goods—listen—go half to you—half—my crew—God send you win—I—I must—rest. You—ever a true mate!"

A ROLL CALL revealed that, in capturing this once rich and famous city, the privateers had not lost more than 30 men killed or wounded in the battle and subsequent looting. Henry Morgan, still mourning the loss of his mate, therefore found mounts for as many men as could ride and sent them out to scour the countryside and so bring in such pitiful refugees as they could find.

Hot and interminable hours dragged by during which female prisoners confined in the Convent of San Jose sorrowed, hungered and trembled in anticipation of their ultimate fate. In vain, Mercedes attempted to comfort her grief-stricken mother and at the same time tried to minimize the fears of friends and contemporaries.

Freebooters took gangs of slaves carefully to taking great mounds of cooling ashes and so from them salvaged many lumps of twisted silver and gold, but far more valuable loot was recovered from a variety of wells and cisterns. Smiles broadened on privateer faces when the mounted parties returned driving before them droves of sumpter mules, fugitive slaves and pack horses. These were panting under the weight of spoils which had not traveled far before exhaustion had put a period to their ill-prepared flight.

On the floor of the Royal Exchange accumulated mounds, and finally hillocks, of precious furniture, trade goods and Flemish tapestries. Bullion, coins, ornaments and jewelry also began to appear in interesting, but not yet satisfactory amounts. The male prisoners, confined in the compound of that great slave market known as the House of the Genesee, quivered in a despairing anticipation of their fate. Through an examination of census and tax rolls, captured in the governor's office, the privateer admiral and his colonels had become well-informed concerning the identity, and wealth, of even the least inhabitants of the ravaged city.

One after another the city's merchants were haled in, and charged to produce ransom money. Sometimes the wild-eyed wretches spoke willingly, described riches cached in stables or up unused chimneys or buried under such and such a flagstone. Others foolishly, and generally fruitlessly, vowed themselves to have been ruined by the fire, quite penniless, until, down on the sands of the waterfront, they were put to torture.

David Armitage lay basking in warm sunshine, after those countless weeks spent in a chill and fetid darkness, it was sheer ecstasy to sense those life-giving rays beating upon his back. Every passing hour seemed to restore his vitality and to bestow renewed vigor. Very soon he would dress, and try walking out to the Convent of San Jose where the girls and women held for ransom were being imprisoned—the others long since had been allotted for the diversion of the conquerors. Persistent inquiry and a bit of bribery had elicited information that a middle-aged woman and a young girl by the name of de Amileta were among those incarcerated.

ON THIS, the fifth morning following the capture of Panama, David was feeling stronger than

at any time since his arrest. Even the eternal pain caused by his ruptured major pectoral muscles was somewhat eased. Probably, he never again would be able to raise his arm backward, or sideways above shoulder height. Praise God, his hands now had quit their trembling; possibly, in time, they might again become as sure and steady as they had been before he had been hoisted by hands tied behind him, high off the floor, and allowed to drop some six feet.

"Ah, there, Doc." Wearing a woman's fringed petticoat draped like a cape, Luke came swaggering into la Merced. "Ready? Good. We'll see rare sport this day. The quality wenches are to be divided."

"Aye. Them as can furnish ransom will be turned back; them as can't will furnish fun."

A handsome woman of about 30 years was the first to be thrust forward, limping for the lack of a shoe.

"Who's this baggage?" Bledry grunted, eying her over a magnificent gold chalice serving him as a wine cup.

"Carmen Pizarro, wife of the royal standard bearer."

"Hold the woman Pizarro to 4000 pesos," Bledry flung at the scribe to his right.

Dr. Armitage gradually worked his way forward. Bledry saw him, leaped up and wrung David's thin hand. "God in His high Heaven! 'Tis the Virginian! God love ye, boy, I'd doomed ye vulture's meat 18 months ago! Sit you down, Davey, and watch our fun."

Armitage remained leaning on his stick. "My thanks, but I ain't strong enough yet. I've come to befriend those who preserved my life."

"Is there aught I can do to favor you?"

"Yes. May I scan that list of prisoners and see if there is mention of a Dona Elena de Amileta and her daughter Mercedes?"

"Twas they, and Judge Andres who made my life bearable here in Panama."

Friends in Panama? Even the miserable women awaiting disposal turned lack-luster eyes in his direction.

A clerk's dirty forefinger descended the list, read, "Aye, there's the name, Amileta."

Bledry cocked a vinous and well-bloodshot eye at Armitage. "Well?"

"I beg you to release them."

Bledry Morgan scratched at his neckband. "None but Harry himself can accomplish that. However, let's look at 'em."

A PAIR of arquebusers began bawling out names and presently returned leading Dona Elena and her daughter. The latter started violently, then burst out, "Oh, Don David! Ayudanos! Save us!"

Thinking widely, David said, "I'll pledge my unpaid shares from Porto Bello. Will that hold?"

"What're they worth?"

"I've not the least idea, but I warrant the Admiral will see that it suffices."

The light that sprang into Mercedes' eyes seemed the only clean thing about the whole dismal scene.

For approximately 30 days, Morgan ruled over the ruined city of Panama, a period during which were paid most of the ransoms extorted on the beach.

The month, for the most part, was spent in roistering and recuperating since a careful reconnaissance had confirmed Harry Morgan's conviction that the Spaniards had become far too dispirited to dispute the Jamaican army's return to San Lorenzo. It was, therefore, a hale and high-spirited corps of privateers which formed up along the Camino Real on the morning of Feb. 14, 1671.

The column's baggage animals, painstakingly collected from the countryside, numbering 175, trundled under the weight of heavy loads of wealth.

Dr. Armitage prodded his easy-treading mule.

Somewhere far off to the south, Mercedes must be riding westwards to meet Don Andres. How long would she remember the battle in arms and who had held her in his arms and who had been the first to kiss her virginal lips? Probably all her life. That she had loved him truly she had demonstrated on the day of the in-taking, but, probably, that love would fade in the light of a new one; after all, Mercedes was only 16.

Never, in Port Royal's brief, but tumultuous, history had that port anticipated so frenzied an outburst of jubilation.

So Panama had fallen! Praise God, the dread shadow of Spanish invasion was removed, for a while at least. Think of it—a British army—albeit a privateer

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