

CHAPTER

2

Adventurers High and Low

“ARE you sure that he is going to show up?”

“Of course, I am.”

“Without fail?”

“Surely, he will be here unless he got killed or something since I saw him last at lunch time.”

“What time is it now?”

“Why ask? . . . It isn't seven yet.”

This bit of conversation was taking place in the restaurant Barcelona, situated opposite the largest gambling house in the Orient, the Fronton Auditorium, where, night after night, thousands of Chinese patrons lose thousands of dollars. A share of the large revenue, derived from the natives and camouflaged as tax, is collected by the French Municipality, allegedly to support non-Chinese institutions.

Which goes to show how far the principle of *Egalite* can be pushed.

I once had the impertinence to ask the director of the

Fronton Auditorium where all these hundreds of thousands of dollars of monthly profits went. Looking at me furiously he answered:

“Don’t you think for a minute that it is all net; there is a lot of sprinkling to do . . . the police . . . the officials of the Municipality . . . the Consul . . . the Press. . . . Squeeze! . . . Squeeze! . . . There is no end to it.”

All very plain . . . plain also that the Chinese are the ones who foot the bill.

The main entrance to the Barcelona exactly faces the door of the Fronton. A very thoughtful convenience for those whose losses call for something with which to soothe their shattered nerves and to brighten up a future which bad luck has darkened with the shadow of despair. Here, as everywhere else, the chit system provides the owner with plenty of invigorating exercise, since he has abundant occasions to run for his money.

As we entered, my friend Breck asked for the manager.

“Good day, Signor Brunati. Could you please let us have a private room?” I asked in a very low voice.

“For a quiet game or for a conference?”

“We have business to discuss.”

“Please follow me, gentlemen.”

A pretty good sort of fellow, this manager of the Barcelona. Like all the rest of his countrymen, he was an enthusiastic exhibitionist whenever he spoke of Mussolini or of the war in Africa, or of his participation in the triumphant march on Rome. The fall of Addis

Ababa provided as much material to his Fascist loquacity in 1936, as did the fall of Rome to those of 1920. Occasionally, and with an air of superiority, he would mention to his Italian listeners the fact that he was from Trieste which had been non-Italian territory before D'Annunzio proved his versatility with the sword as well as with the pen.

Brunati was an interesting character. No one had ever found out the secret of his power over the owner who was a former naval officer. Brunati had trained the man so well that he would eat right out of his hand. The secret remained a secret.

We slightly hesitate to qualify Brunati's past with the flattering term 'adventurous.' There is so little to his credit that might justify this appellation. Except, perhaps, the fact that he could not return to Italy. An investigation had shown that the operating room on the ship where he worked as an orderly, contained quantities of contraband Japanese narcotics for Italian consumption and Italian revolvers for the Chinese who had the nerve to resist the Japanese invasion.

What else, then, could he do under the circumstances, but to recall that somewhere on the coast of China there existed a city where he could remedy the temporary inconvenience of being without a country?

He came to Shanghai.

Here he easily secured the necessary legal protection with the aid of which, plus other machinations, he became the manager of the Barcelona Restaurant and,

later, took on another more interesting and lucrative position.

An air of cheerful hospitality has brought much popularity to the Barcelona. Diverse elements of colors and races come there for purposes other than of securing physical sustenance, more particularly the foreign sailors and ship officers whom some easy method of 'earning' money might interest.

The gentleman for whom we were waiting was Senor Teran, a talented attorney, who, in his earlier and tempestuous days, had enjoyed a certain prestige in far-away Moscow. This accounts for the anomaly that his advice was eagerly sought by immature Russian ladies who consulted him in all confidence although he was not Russian but Spanish.

Mr. Breck who, as an old resident, knew the biographies of all persons of consequence in the foreign settlements of the Orient, entertained me with a lot of details about this Senor Teran who, with a complacent assurance, could get you any passport or fix any legal matter which needed fixing.

Our appointment with Teran was arranged to secure a passport for me. It did not matter what nationality, as I really did not need any. My intention was to find out how the procedure of getting a passport was accomplished. Frankly, the whole thing seemed incredible.

An atmosphere of mystery, to date impenetrable, surrounded the person of Senor Teran. No one knew any-

thing about his means of subsistence, save that he was a lawyer attached to the Spanish Legation at Peking. This sinecure was a very essential pre-requisite in setting the stage for his activities. It read well on a visiting card, on stationery, or on printed invitations. As for getting into 'society,' a diplomatic title was every bit as effective and, incidentally, as remunerative as an 'Open Sesame.'

The acquisition of the diplomatic title had been a very easy matter. A few elaborate dinners at his house; the choicest foods, copious libations with an accompaniment of well-trained Russian sirens, (for moral support, don't you know) and our Ulysses, in the guise of the Consul General for Spain would forget completely to stuff his ears with wax.

A faint whisper, between sips of champagne, sufficed to bring down the coveted plum.

"Legal Counselor to our Legation at Peking? Why, honey bunch, he could have my own job for one of your divine kisses."

Just like that.

Teran certainly knew his Consul Generals.

History: The Spanish Minister at Peking wrote to Madrid for the appointment of Senor Teran as Legal Attache to the legation; the nomination was duly seconded and forwarded by the Capitol.

Lavish and elaborate notice was given in all the Shanghai papers.

Hundreds of letters of congratulation arrived from

Shanghai society in which the Government of Spain was highly commended for its most wise choice of a man of such outstanding intellectual and patriotic qualifications to act as the representative of Themis in this land of . . . joy.

Following this victory, in which all the dangers had been on the side of the besieged, Teran and the Consul General for Spain became inseparable. Ulysses did not give a hoop for reefs and rocks. The Consul had to have his sirens, even before breakfast.

Teran entered the room just at the time when friend Breck was finishing the excerpts from the biography of this experienced worker.

The formality of introduction over, he sat down, not without manifesting a certain anxious curiosity to know the reason why he had been called to this urgent conference.

"Don't get nervous, Teran. Everything is all right, this gentleman is well recommended."

"His name again if you please."

"G. E. Miller."

"Well, Mr. Miller, I am at your service. What can I do for you?" he asked, smiling.

"Just a minute . . . just a minute," interrupted Breck, "I will give you all the information you need. Mr. Miller, for reasons which he has not explained and which do not concern us, needs a passport. Any kind of nationality will do, provided it has the right of Extra-

territoriality. You have already secured, for other clients, Chilean and Brazilian passports from friends of yours who are the representatives of those countries, but Mr. Miller prefers a good 'imported' passport."

"What do you mean imported?" I asked, realizing that there was a certain 'trade' slang with which I was not familiar.

"Imported," explained Teran, "is an authentic passport which has been bought from its original owner."

He promised to give my case due study and consideration. As Teran seemed ill at ease in the Barcelona, it was agreed that I should present myself at his office the following week to meet his partner who specialized in passport transactions and he hurriedly departed.

The fact of the matter is that he was now most anxious to safeguard appearances, taking every precaution to avoid the least suspicion concerning his activities. He feared that his protectress, known as 'Mamacita,' might very much resent the fact that her consulting attorney was mixed up with 'irregular' practice.

A few days after our acquaintance, Teran invited me for a ride to be followed by dinner at the French Club. While we were enjoying the cool air he asked me point-blank, as though struck by a sudden inspiration:

"By the way, Miller, you are coming to Sir Victor Sassoon's party, are you not?"

"Not that I know," I answered.