

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark blue color, framing the central text.

The Conspirators

THE CONSPIRATORS

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It was nearly twenty years ago that Burns took up, and followed by various paths to its end, the exceedingly interesting and romantic case of the Costa Rican banknote. Counterfeit Central American paper money—under ordinary circumstances—is not among the chief causes of anxiety of the United States Secret Service. But this note, unfortunately, was manufactured in the United States.

Burns started at once for the office of the consul-general of Costa Rica in New York.

"Ah, you come from the grand government of the United States," said the consul, in exuberant friendliness. "Welcome! I greet you!"

He seated Burns in his innermost office.

"It is the revolutionists," he explained. "This much we know, but not yet can we prove it."

"The revolutionists!" said Burns.

"You are surprised, my friend? No wonder," said the consul. "But listen; I will tell you. It is like this.

"My country has no revolutions. It is not like other Central American countries. It is Costa Rica—the Rich Coast, as you say it in your English tongue. We have riches, we have property, we have justice. We have more school-teachers than soldiers. But now, two, three years ago, we find the revolutionary junta—here in your great city, New York. They plot and plan to destroy my country. At the head is a very bad man—General de Mora; his grandfather once was Costa Rican President—a bad, a very devilish man."

"I see," said Burns. "What then?"

“I will tell you. Listen. This is the hard times, is it not?” (It was the darkest period after the big panic.) “Very well. To have revolution, one first must have what? Money. Am I not right? But there is no money. What, then, will they do? Ah—they will make the false money here! They take it with them and pass it in Costa Rica. In this way they will get funds for their revolution. You see? Is it not terrible? Is it not diabolical? My friend, they will destroy my country by first passing counterfeits among its people!”

“Do you know this?” said Burns.

“This much we know—though yet we can not prove even this much definitely. This money has been passed—two, three months ago—by one member of this junta—at Port Limon, our seaport.”

“Who passed it?” asked Burns. “This General Mora?”

“No. He is the chief. He would not act so openly. It was a younger man, a man called de Requesans.”

“Was he alone?”

“No; there was another with him—ah, yes, a woman. A most charming lady—an American, whom they say he will marry.”

The Shadows and the Revolutionist

In a day Burns had his shadows on the suspects—all of them in New York. The first and most important was General Federico de Mora—a distinguished-looking old man, with dark skin, piercing black eyes, and a shock of silver hair. He was an old sinner in the revolutionary business. His grandfather had been president of the little republic; and the grandson would never be satisfied, it seemed, until he succeeded him.

Ricardo de Requesans, the second man, was much younger—a handsome figure, straight as an arrow, wearing a black mustache and imperial. He was a widower, and lived part of the time with his mother-in-law, a Mrs. Collins, in Long Island City. Part of the time, when funds permitted, he had stopped at the semi-fashionable boarding-house in New York which General de Mora graced with his presence.

The third figure was the “little widow,” as Burns has always called her—Mrs. Girard, a bright-eyed, vivacious young woman, who, following the death of her husband in California, had come to New York to cultivate her rich contralto voice. By chance, she and a companion had come to live in the same boarding-house with the revolutionists. She was rich, talented, and lively, and de Requesans had from the first been her devoted suitor.

The Two-Million-Dollar Sofa

Having fixed his shadows on them, Burns began his investigations of their celebrated sofa.

The money-changing expedition upon which the revolution was to be founded had ended suddenly, some weeks before, where it had begun—at Port Limon, on Costa Rica’s sea-coast. De Requesans and his charming widow had only started their campaign of lavish spending of counterfeit bills, when it became known that there was counterfeit money in circulation and the handsome “passers” fled between days.

They had escaped successfully, and with them, supposedly, their counterfeits. But the government officials of Costa Rica took no chances. Hunting anxiously around Port Limon, they had chanced upon a piece of furniture, a sofa, which had reached the country at the same time de Requesans had. They had undone its careful packing, torn it apart, found hidden in its back two million dollars worth of counterfeit bills.

Now, in all probability, this sofa had been taken to Costa Rica by de Requesans and his fiancée. The practical question was, could this be proved definitely before a court of law. Burns at once sent an operator to Costa Rica to bring back the mysterious sofa and all its packing. It arrived at length, and Burns over it in detail. The most likely clue, he came to think, was the piece of burlap it was wrapped in. And that certainly was not a very likely clue to the ordinary mind.

It was, on the face of it, just a piece of common burlap. If you have ever had occasion to pack anything in burlap, you will probably recall that, after you secured the stuff from some shop-keeper, you found it covered with marks, which you put on the inside of your own package. Sometimes the marks tell a straight stamped or stenciled story about the former use of the burlap—So-and-so’s coffee, or Such-and-Such brand of other goods.

Let XX Represent the Unknown Quantity

This burlap told no plain story. On examining it, Burns found merely the following cryptic marks:

2 XX

64

Now, what did that mean? Was it merely a useless circumstance, or did it contain a clue?

In the hope of securing some light on the problem presented by this simple piece of burlap, Burns visited a great number of places. Among them were the wholesale dry-goods houses that cluster in the region of Worth Street in New York. They told him of several commodities that were marked with the double X as a brand. The “64” was a different matter. That might refer to something else. The double X, for instance, was used for shirts. And there was also a chance that the burlap might have been used as a covering of shipments of overalls.

Burns visited a number of overall manufacturers, and finally, at Newburgh, New York, he found the factory from which the shipment had been made. So far, so good. But it seemed like hunting for a needle in a haystack to discover just where the shipment had gone. The manufacturer said it would be impossible. Burns kept doggedly on his path; and in a few hours, by examining order-book after order-book, he was able to determine what the factory manager had said was impossible. He found the destination of those overalls. They had been bought by a little dry-goods store in Long Island City.

Burns went straight to the little dry-goods store, and asked if they could sell him some burlap. There were piles of it in the cellar; they were glad to get rid of it.

Confidentially he explained to the shipping-clerk, when they reached the basement, that he did not want any burlap, after all. He had enough of it in that piece which bore the tell-tale marks. But could the clerk remember selling any within the past few months to anyone who had come to him with a similar tale? The clerk thoughtfully scratched the side of his nose. Yes, he did remember. An old lady with gray hair, dressed in mourning, with gold-rimmed spectacles, had bought some.

“And would you know her if you saw her again?” asked Burns eagerly.

“I think so,” replied the clerk—“although I never saw her before or since.”

Burns had been doing some rapid-fire thinking. Mrs. Collins was an old lady in black with gold-rimmed spectacles. With the clerk, he sauntered around to her house and rang the bell. An inquiry for a mythical lodger brought a sharp negative from her; but as the door closed the clerk cried under his breath: "Yes, that's the woman who bought the burlap!"

Burns felt that he was now on solid ground. He canvassed the express drivers of the neighborhood, and finally found the identical man who had carried the sofa from Mrs. Collins' house to the pier where it had set out upon its eventful journey to Costa Rica. The expressman was able to recall that a "tall Spaniard" had engaged him for the job, and had paid him well.

The case was now perfect, so far as it had gone. The shadows who had dodged de Requesans and the little widow reported them still in New York. It was the work of merely a moment to arrest both of them.

That was only the beginning, however. The real goal, as always, was the man highest up together, of course, with all those all the way up. In this case there was one wily old conspirator who stood at the very pinnacle. The problem was to get him. Could they?

A Call from the General

Scarcely had de Requesans been arrested and, with the little widow, lodged in the old Ludlow Street jail in New York, when General de Mora himself walked, in his dignified fashion, into the very office of the Secret Service and asked to see Mr. Burns. Burns came to the window.

"Good ahfternoon, Meestair Bearns," purred the General. "Here ees my car-rd. I understand you like to see me? . Thees ees my address. At any time that I can ser-rve you, you will find me in my rooms."

It was bold, crafty. The old fellow was as cunning as a rat. He knew there was nothing "on" him, so far.

"That is very kind of you, General," replied Burns, suavely putting the card into his pocket—as if he had not known already every time the General went out to buy a newspaper or overthrow a government. "When I want any thing I will call on you."

“Thank you, Meestair Bearn. Adios, sir.” And the General bowed himself out backwards.

He had known that he would be suspected but he felt so sure that no evidence could be obtained against him that he had actually derived pleasure in thus sticking his head into the trap, and then withdrawing it safe still on his shoulders.

As it was, de Mora had good reason to congratulate himself. The case against de Requesans and his fiancée was pretty clear. But how could the counterfeit be traced back to the chief criminal? There was only one way, apparently—a confession. It was necessary that either de Requesans or the little widow tell.

The little widow was a pathetic figure, in her present circumstances. A wealthy and dainty: woman, who was certainly not a principal in the affair, and who was separated by the width of the continent from her older friends or, acquaintances, had been thrown into the old jail of New York’s East Side, noted everywhere as the most ancient and squalid prison in the city. Her situation was enough to arouse sympathy in a casual stranger. But there was at least one person in New York who had more than a casual interest in her. This was a young American business man named Bates, who formerly, before she had given her confidence to de Requesans, had been her suitor.

The Pretty Widow in the Old Jail

Hearing of her ill fortune, Bates__went to visit her and was horrified at seeing her in that dark, ill-ventilated jail. He lost no time in looking up Burns and finding out exactly how far Mrs. Girard was involved.

Burns told him. “The trouble is,” he continued, “she’s tied, hand and foot, to that crowd. If she would only drop them, as they will drop her, it would be simple enough.”

Bates went away, planning what could be done.

In a short time Burns had another caller who was very much interested in the situation of the widow. The warden of the jail came up to see him, to learn about her chances. After hinting around for some time, he asked point-blank about her case.

“I’m very sorry for Mrs. Girard,” said Burns slowly, as if weighing something

very carefully in his mind. “They’re putting up a job on her.” Then, in an apparent burst of confidence, he explained—what he knew was true—that de Requesans had made plans to go free and leave Mrs. Girard to take care of herself. It was true; but it was also an excellent chance to work upon the feelings of the woman and get the much-needed confession.

“Yes, I’m very sorry for that little woman,” said Burns pensively; “she’s up against a pretty hard situation.”

“Don’t you think you ought to tell her about it?” asked the warden.

Burns laughed. “What—I tell her? I guess you’ve never heard her give her opinion of me. No—it wouldn’t do the slightest good; she wouldn’t believe a word I told her.”

“I think she would,” said the warden—and went back and told Mrs. Girard the whole conversation.

It worked exactly as Burns hoped. In a very short time he was invited to an interview with the widow. She didn’t trust him entirely then, of course. He had no hope of persuading her himself. But he proposed, instead, that she select some friend in whom she had absolute confidence; and she selected Bates.

The rest was simple. Burns went with Bates to the office of a surety company downtown. The proofs Burns had collected there were very clear. Bates was easily convinced of the plot of the conspirators to desert the widow. He returned and told her of it. As she heard and understood it all, she broke into hysterical crying and denunciation of the man who had deceived her. They should all suffer for what they had done to her, she said.

Burns had his confession at last.

Love, Revolution, and Washington Society

The part of the little widow had begun months before, when she had first reached New York from California. It was a new world; she entered it with the interest and freedom of a young woman left alone in the world, with several hundreds of thousands of dollars in her own right. Her husband had been older than herself. She had seen little of the excitement of life, and she had come East to see the life of the great city as well as to train her voice. And then she had

chanced to meet the two fascinating Central American adventurers in her boarding-house.

From the start both men, old and young, had been devoted to her. The younger wooed her with intense fervor. Both showed her a deference and a confidence that were delightful. In a very short time they admitted her to their conferences about their impending occupation of Costa Rica. It was a matter, seemingly, that was just about to be consummated.

“We shall strike a blow that will paralyze the government from the very start,” explained General de Mora, bringing his fist down on the table as if the blow had already fallen. “Our troops will land here, and here,” he said, sticking pins in a map of Costa Rica that lay before him.

“Ricardo,” he asked, looking up, “have you closed the deal with the German agent for the rifles?”

De Requesans answered that all was ready—the rifles and ammunition, and the supplies. There seemed to be no possible slip. And when the revolution came the young man was to be Costa Rica’s ambassador at Washington.

Counterfeiting as a War Measure

While the lights burned pinkly on__the tables in the lobster palaces on Broadway, de Requesans had poured his story softly into the little widow’s ear; and finally the psychological moment came. Ricardo de Requesans and Julia Girard were engaged. Then at last tilt great coup itself was sprung.

One night de Requesans unfolded to her the latest scheme of de Mora’s. It was brilliant, ingenious. It struck a double blow at the republic. It provided them with funds to finance the revolution, without calling on the numerous mythical bankers who stood ready to aid them; and, at the same time, it would ruin the Costa Rican government itself, and make it an easy prey. The scheme was nothing less than counterfeiting the currency of Costa Rica.

Of course it was not really counterfeiting, after all, he said. They were so nearly in control that they might issue their own money if they chose. But this plan had its advantages.

“It is a war measure, my dear Julia,” he said. “You see, we shall introduce the

notes quietly in Costa Rica, and exchange them for gold. Of course we shall have to do it at a premium; but we can afford to do that, for, don't you see, it will be nearly all clear profit. Think of it—we shall make them put up the money for our own revolution! And, at the same time, we shall strike a tremendous blow at the monetary system of the country. It will cripple them so that they can not raise funds to fight us. There is considerable trouble in money affairs now, and the government is in arrears even on the interest on the existing debt.”

So he rattled on, sketching what indeed was one of the shrewdest schemes ever devised for carrying on a revolution.

\$3,000,000 Worth of Counterfeits

And now he had found a financial backer, a capitalist to float the enterprise, in the woman who loved him. He did not have to urge the little widow to put money into it; she thanked him for allowing her to do so.

Once there was real money to work with, things moved fast and furiously. A photoengraver in New York was found to make a plate by the photo-etching process. From this photo-etched plate, transfers were made by an expert transferer. It was all done in about the same manner in which the government printed its money. They printed an enormous batch of the money, some three million dollars' worth of hundred-colon notes. At last everything was ready. One day de Requesans and his fiancée sailed together secretly for Costa Rica, with the benediction of de Mora. In their grips they carried \$285,000 in counterfeit notes. They also shipped the sofa to Costa Rica.

De Requesans and Mrs. Girard landed at Port Limon, one of the points on the map in which de Mora was fond of sticking pins. De Requesans began quietly to pass the counterfeits, and the chink of the gold in exchange was sweet music to his hungry ears—even sweeter than the musical voice of his pretty fiancée. Then came the deluge, and they were compelled to flee. The glamour on the romance of the little widow began wearing off. Instead of dinners and society at Washington, she found herself fleeing secretly from place to place like a hunted creature. And yet, like womankind from the beginning of the world, she had still the uncomplaining faith that it would all turn out right in the end. Ricardo said it would.

The Trunk with a False Bottom

But now that the disillusionment had come, the woman, wild with anger and hatred, poured out into the willing ears of Burns the bitter story of her deception at the hands of the conspirators. There were more cases of counterfeiting than one. She told them all fully, and Burns sat and laid his plans for returning General de Mora's call. His whole concern now was to fasten his hands upon the crafty head of the whole operation.

The widow had not confined herself alone to financing the operations in Costa Rica. She had backed, as well, a plan for counterfeiting Colombian notes; and in this de Mora had acted directly. He had arranged for printing \$250,000 worth of bills, had had a trunk with a false bottom made for carrying them, and had sent them down. The government of Colombia had then confiscated the notes, and shot de Mora's accomplice—the man who was introducing them.

"That trunk," said Burns to himself, when he left Mrs. Girard, "was probably made by some trunk-maker near the boarding-house."

So he started out to look for trunk-makers in the neighborhood. He found two within a few blocks, and he dropped in to see one of them.

"About four months ago," he remarked, "you put a false bottom in a trunk for a friend of mine. I want one just like it."

The trunk-maker was puzzled. Burns described his friend—de Mora. Still the trunk-maker was puzzled. He didn't recollect. His puzzlement was genuine—for a good reason: he hadn't made it .

Burns excused himself as best he could, crossed the street to the other shop, and put the same question to the second man.

The look on the trunk-maker's face was most encouraging. "Oh, yes," he nodded; "I remember well. A big, tall man with a large white mustache, and a small fellow, fat, dark like a nigger."

That was enough. The little fat man was the one who had been shot by the Colombians. Burns thanked the trunk-maker and said he would call again. The first the man knew that all had not been right in the making of a secret hiding-place for "some valuable papers" was the summons to appear before the federal Grand Jury to identify de Mora.

It next became necessary, in building up the case against de Mora, to find the men who had made the counterfeit for him. In her confession the widow had been hazy as to names, dates, and places. But there was enough to serve as a beginning.

The Cuban Photographer

Moreover, in a memorandum-book in the pocket of de Requesans was found a long list of people to whom he had paid money. Burns took the names and ran them out. One proved to be that of a Cuban photoengraver in New York—Burnez. Burns called on him.

“I am the attorney for de Requesans,” he explained. “You know, he’s in jail. Now, I want you to keep still, Burnez, and not tell anybody you made those plates for that scheme of his. I’ll make it right with you. What do you think it will be worth to you?”

Burnez said he didn’t know whether it was worth anything. He assured Burns that, as far as he was concerned, he didn’t want to make any trouble.

“You see, de Requesans was interested in a revolution,” he said. “As a good Cuban revolutionist myself, I thought we should all stick together. I was just helping the cause.”

“Have you the original negatives and positives?” Burns asked, affecting alarm that they should be at large.

“Oh, no,” Burnez answered. “They were destroyed as soon as the plates were made.”

Burns pulled out one of the hundred-colon notes, and asked the man if he could identify it. “Yes,” he answered positively; “that’s the note all right. But, you know, it went through a transfer process.”

So much for the photographer. Now for the maker of the plates.

The Plates in the North River

Mrs. Girard had told of a man somewhere on Fulton Street who had delivered the notes and had the plates, but she did not know his name or where his place

was. The next thing was to look up all the engravers on Fulton Street. That, in itself, is not the easiest of tasks.

An establishment doing business under the name of Dobbs seemed to be the most likely place. A note purporting to come from de Requesans was carefully prepared to be sent to him. A boy was picked out to carry it, and coached to play his part. The note read to this effect:

Take good care of the plates, because I may aid myself in getting out by giving them over to the government. You can rest assured you will not be involved. Keep them intact and hand them over only to myself or my attorney.

The boy had been instructed to wait until the man read the note and said something. If the engraver said, “All right,” the boy was to cough.

Everything went smoothly. A very much forced cough suddenly issued from the open door of the engraver’s shop. In walked Burns.

“How are you?” he said, extending his hand cordially to Dobbs, who was holding the note in his left hand.

One look was enough for each. They wrestled for the note—and Burns got it.

Dobbs, however, denied all knowledge of the plates. Even when Burns and his men searched the place from floor to ceiling, they could find nothing. Dobbs was, nevertheless, hustled off to the Secret Service headquarters, and Burns waited for the man’s partner to come in.

At last he came, open-eyed at the disorder in their little place of business.

“Sh♦h,” whispered Burns, drawing him aside. “I’m from a lawyer’s office. Your partner has been arrested, and wants to see you quick. But he told me to tell you to say nothing to the Secret Service. See?”

Fortunately, the partner “fell” for the story that Burns had handed out almost on the spur of the moment.

“Are they hidden?” whispered Burns, bringing his lips close to the partner’s ear in confidence.

“What?” he asked in momentary caution.

“The plates—the plates!” feigned Burns, in great excitement.

“Oh, yes,” succumbed the partner, “the Colombian plates are hidden, but the others are in the North River.”

With never a smile, Burns disclosed his identity.

The Colombian plates were found at the home of a friend of the firm, and a wrecking company was engaged to search for the Costa Rican plates. They lay at the Jersey City end of a ferry. A diver was sent down, and for four or five nights he dived, until at last the original hundred-colon note plates of the counterfeits were found.

This was the last link in the chain that Burns had been forging for the gallant invaders of Costa Rica.

The time had come to return the call of General de Mora. The shadows reported that he was at home and Burns sallied out toward his boarding-house.

“I should like to see General de Mora,” asked Burns of the neat-capped maid.

“He is not in, sir,” answered the maid, returning to him.

Burns handed her his card and asked her to try again. A moment later she tripped back. “I beg pardon, but I made a mistake. The General says for you to come right upstairs,”

There the sly old fox stood in the middle of the room, smiling and balancing the pasteboard thoughtfully between his finger-tips. “Ah, Meestair Bearn, it is indeed a great plaisir,” he exclaimed politely. “A cup of coffee? No? A cigar or cigarette? No? A drink? No? It is too bad. I am at a loss to entertain you.”

Burns Explains His Call

You know, General,” hastened Burns, “I’m merely renewing our acquaintance of the day you so kindly called at our office. You said you would be glad to be of any assistance to me.”

“Yes.”

“And I have called—”

“Yes.”

“With a warrant for your arrest.”

The General moved not an eyelash. “This is very annoying to me,” he protested coolly. “There is not one particle of evidence that I am concerned in any matter that interests the Secret Service.”

“I am very sorry, General,” pursued Burns firmly, “but you understand I have a duty to perform in this matter.”

“My dear fellow,” he returned heartily, “no excuses. I shall go with you.”

He went with Burns to the Federal Building in the same outward spirit in which he would have gone to a club. There he was turned over to the United States marshal, who placed him in jail. That was the last the boarding-house saw of this soldier of fortune. There was a long trial, in which de Mora and de Requesans had the benefit of some of the best legal talent in New York. But they were convicted, largely on the testimony of the “little widow.”

And two years later two subdued soldiers of fortune left a federal prison to revolutionize in safer regions that knew no Burns.