

CHAPTER TWO

Between moonrise and sunset I was stumbling through the bracken of the little copse that was like a tuft of hair on the brow of the great white quarry. It was quite dark, in among the trees. I made the circuit of the copse, whistling softly my three bars of "Lillibulero." Then I plunged into it. The bracken underfoot rustled and rustled. I came to a halt. A little bar of light lay on the horizon in front of me, almost colourless. It was crossed again and again by the small fir-trunks that were little more than wands. A woodpigeon rose with a sudden crash of sound, flapping away against the branches. My pulse was dancing with delight--my heart, too. It was like a game of hide-and-seek, and yet it was life at last. Everything grew silent again and I began to think I had missed my time. Down below in the plain, a great way off, a dog was barking continuously. I moved forward a few paces and whistled. The glow of adventure began to die away. There was nothing at all--a little mystery of light on the tree-trunks.

I moved forward again, getting back towards the road. Against the glimmer of dead light I thought I caught the outlines of a man's hat down among the tossing lines of the bracken. I whispered loudly:

"Carlos! Carlos!"

There was a moment of hoarse whispering; a sudden gruff sound. A shaft of blazing yellow light darted from the level of the ground into my dazed eyes. A man sprang at me and thrust something cold and knobby into my neckcloth. The light continued to blaze into my eyes; it moved upwards and shone on a red waistcoat dashed with gilt buttons. I was being arrested.... "In the King's name...." It was a most sudden catastrophe. A hand was clutching my windpipe.

"Don't you so much as squeak, Mr. Castro," a voice whispered in my ear.

The lanthorn light suddenly died out, and I heard whispers.

"Get him out on to the road.... I'll tackle the other . . . Darbies. . . . Mind his knife."

I was like a confounded rabbit in their hands. One of them had his fist on my collar and jerked me out upon the hard road. We rolled down the embankment, but he was on the top. It seemed an abominable episode, a piece of bad faith on the part of fate. I ought to have been exempt from these sordid haps, but the man's hot leathery hand on my throat was like a foretaste of the other collar. And

I was horribly afraid--horribly--of the sort of mysterious potency of the laws that these men represented, and I could think of nothing to do.

We stood in a little slanting cutting in the shadow. A watery light before the moon's rising slanted downwards from the hilltop along the opposite bank. We stood in utter silence.

"If you stir a hair," my captor said coolly, "I'll squeeze the blood out of your throat, like a rotten orange."

He had the calmness of one dealing with an everyday incident; yet the incident was--it should have been--tremendous. We stood waiting silently for an eternity, as one waits for a hare to break covert before the beaters. From down the long hill came a small sound of horses' hoofs--a sound like the beating of the heart, intermittent--a muffled thud on turf, and a faint clink of iron. It seemed to die away unheard by the runner beside me. Presently there was a crackling of the short pine branches, a rustle, and a hoarse whisper said from above:

"Other's cleared, Thorns. Got that one safe?"

"All serene."

The man from above dropped down into the road, a clumsy, cloaked figure. He turned his lanthorn upon me, in a painful yellow glare.

"What! 'Tis the young 'un," he grunted, after a moment. "Read the warrant, Thorns."

My captor began to fumble in his pocket, pulled out a paper, and bent down into the light. Suddenly he paused and looked up at me.

"This ain't----- Mr. Lilly white, I don't believe this ain't a Jack Spaniard."

The clinks of bits and stirrup-irons came down in a waft again.

"That be hanged for a tale, Thorns," the man with the lanthorn said sharply. "If this here ain't Riego--or the other--I'll . . ."

I began to come out of my stupor.

"My name's John Kemp," I said.

The other grunted. "Hurry up, Thorns."

"But, Mr. Lillywhite," Thorns reasoned, "he don't speak like a Dago. Split me if he do! And we ain't in a friendly country either, you know that. We can't afford to rile the gentry!"

I plucked up courage.

"You'll get your heads broke," I said, "if you wait much longer. Hark to that!"

The approaching horses had turned off the turf on to the hard road; the steps of first one and then another sounded out down the silent hill. I knew it was the Free Traders from that; for except between banks they kept to the soft roadsides as if it were an article of faith. The noise of hoofs became that of an army.

The runners began to consult. The shadow called Thorns was for bolting across country; but Lilly white was not built for speed. Besides he did not know the lie of the land, and believed the Free Traders were mere bogeys.

"They'll never touch us," Lillywhite grumbled. "We've a warrant... King's name...." He was flashing his lanthorn aimlessly up the hill.

"Besides," he began again, "we've got this gallus bird. If he's not a Spaniard, he knows all about them. I heard him. Kemp he may be, but he spoke Spanish up there... and we've got something for our trouble. He'll swing, I'll lay you a-----"

From far above us came a shout, then a confused noise of voices. The moon began to get up; above the cutting the clouds had a fringe of sudden silver. A horseman, cloaked and muffled to the ears, trotted warily towards us.

"What's up?" he hailed from a matter of ten yards. "What are you showing that glim for? Anything wrong below?"

The runners kept silence; we heard the click of a pistol lock.

"In the King's name," Lillywhite shouted, "get off that nag and lend a hand! We've a prisoner."

The horseman gave an incredulous whistle, and then began to shout, his voice winding mournfully uphill, "Hallo! Hallo--o--o." An echo stole back, "Hallo! Hallo--o--o"; then a number of voices. The horse stood, drooping its head, and the man turned in his saddle. "Runners," he shouted, "Bow Street runners! Come along, come along, boys! We'll roast 'em.... Runners! Runners!"

The sound of heavy horses at a jolting trot came to our ears.

"We're in for it," Lillywhite grunted. "D-----n this county of Kent."

Thorns never loosed his hold of my collar. At the steep of the hill the men and horses came into sight against the white sky, a confused crowd of ominous things.

"Turn that lanthorn off'n me," the horseman said. "Don't you see you frighten my horse? Now, boys, get round them. . . ."

The great horses formed an irregular half-circle round us; men descended clumsily, like sacks of corn. The lanthorn was seized and flashed upon us; there was a confused hubbub. I caught my own name.

"Yes, I'm Kemp... John Kemp," I called. "I'm true blue."

"Blue be hanged!" a voice shouted back. "What be you a-doing with runners?"

The riot went on--forty or fifty voices. The runners were seized; several hands caught at me. It was impossible to make myself heard; a fist struck me on the cheek.

"Gibbet 'em," somebody shrieked; "they hung my nephew! Gibbet 'em all the three. Young Kemp's mother's a bad 'un. An informer he is. Up with 'em!"

I was pulled down on my knees, then thrust forward, and then left to myself while they rushed to bonnet Lillywhite. I stumbled against a great, quiet farm horse.

A continuous scuffling went on; an imperious voice cried: "Hold your tongues, you fools! Hold your tongues!..." Someone else called: "Hear to Jack Rangsley. Hear to him!"

There was a silence. I saw a hand light a torch at the lanthorn, and the crowd of faces, the muddle of limbs, the horses' heads, and the quiet trees above, flickered into sight.

"Don't let them hang me, Jack Rangsley," I sobbed. "You know I'm no spy. Don't let 'em hang me, Jack."

He rode his horse up to me, and caught me by the collar.

"Hold your tongue," he said roughly. He began to make a set speech,

anathematizing runners. He moved to tie our feet, and hang us by our fingernails over the quarry edge.

A hubbub of assent and dissent went up; then the crowd became unanimous. Rangsley slipped from his horse.

"Blindfold 'em, lads," he cried, and turned me sharply round.

"Don't struggle," he whispered in my ear; his silk handkerchief came cool across my eyelids. I felt hands fumbling with a knot at the back of my head. "You're all right," he said again. The hubbub of voices ceased suddenly. "Now, lads, bring 'em along."

A voice I knew said their watchword, "Snuff and enough," loudly, and then, "What's agate?"

Someone else answered, "It's Rooksby, it's Sir Ralph."

The voice interrupted sharply, "No names, now. I don't want hanging." The hand left my arm; there was a pause in the motion of the procession. I caught a moment's sound of whispering. Then a new voice cried, "Strip the runners to the shirt. Strip 'em. That's it." I heard some groans and a cry, "You won't murder us." Then a nasal drawl, "We will sure--ly." Someone else, Rangsley, I think, called, "Bring 'em along--this way now."

After a period of turmoil we seemed to come out of the crowd upon a very rough, descending path; Rangsley had called out, "Now, then, the rest of you be off; we've got enough here"; and the hoofs of heavy horses sounded again. Then we came to a halt, and Rangsley called sharply from close to me:

"Now, you runners--and you, John Kemp--here you be on the brink of eternity, above the old quarry. There's a sheer drop of a hundred feet. We'll tie your legs and hang you by your fingers. If you hang long enough, you'll have time to say your prayers. Look alive, lads!"

The voice of one of the runners began to shout, "You'll swing for this--you-----"

As for me I was in a dream. "Jack," I said, "Jack, you won't----"

"Oh, that's all right," the voice said in a whisper. "Mum, now! It's all right."

It withdrew itself a little from my ear and called, "Now then, ready with them. When I say three...."

I heard groans and curses, and began to shout for help. My voice came back in an echo, despairingly. Suddenly I was dragged backward, and the bandage pulled from my eyes,

"Come along," Rangsley said, leading me gently enough to the road, which was five steps behind. "It's all a joke," he snarled. "A pretty bad one for those catchpolls. Hear 'em groan. The drop's not two feet."

We made a few paces down the road; the pitiful voices of the runners crying for help came plainly to my ears.

"You--they--aren't murdering them?" I asked.

"No, no," he answered. "Can't afford to. Wish we could; but they'd make it too hot for us."

We began to descend the hill. From the quarry a voice shrieked:

"Help--help--for the love of God--I can't. . . ."

There was a grunt and the sound of a fall; then a precisely similar sequence of sounds.

"That'll teach 'em," Rangsley said ferociously. "Come along--they've only rolled down a bank. They weren't over the quarry. It's all right. I swear it is."

And, as a matter of fact, that was the smugglers' ferocious idea of humour. They would hang any undesirable man, like these runners, whom it would make too great a stir to murder outright, over the edge of a low bank, and swear to him that he was clawing the brink of Shakespeare's Cliff or any other hundred-foot drop. The wretched creatures suffered all the tortures of death before they let go, and, as a rule, they never returned to our parts.