

CHAPTER THREE

The spirit of the age has changed; everything has changed so utterly that one can hardly believe in the existence of one's earlier self. But I can still remember how, at that moment, I made the acquaintance of my heart--a thing that bounded and leapt within my chest, a little sickeningly. The other details I forget.

Jack Rangsley was a tall, big-boned, thin man, with something sinister in the lines of his horseman's cloak, and something reckless in the way he set his spurred heel on the ground. He was the son of an old Marsh squire. Old Rangsley had been head of the last of the Owlery--the aristocracy of export smugglers--and Jack had sunk a little in becoming the head of the Old Bourne Tap importers. But he was hard enough, tyrannical enough, and had nerve enough to keep Free-trading alive in our parts until long after it had become an anachronism. He ended his days on the gallows, of course, but that was long afterwards.

"I'd give a dollar to know what's going on in those runners' heads," Rangsley said, pointing back with his crop. He laughed gayly. The great white face of the quarry rose up pale in the moonlight; the dusky red fires of the limekilns glowed at the base, sending up a blood-red dust of sullen smoke. "I'll swear they think they've dropped straight into hell.

"You'll have to cut the country, John," he added suddenly, "they'll have got your name uncommon pat. I did my best for you." He had had me tied up like that before the runners' eyes in order to take their suspicions off me. He had made a pretence to murder me with the same idea. But he didn't believe they were taken in. "There'll be warrants out before morning, if they ain't too shaken. But what were you doing in the business? The two Spaniards were lying in the fern looking on when you come blundering your clumsy nose in. If it hadn't been for Rooksby you might have----- Hullo, there!" he broke off.

An answer came from the black shadow of a clump of roadside elms. I made out the forms of three or four horses standing with their heads together.

"Come along," Rangsley said; "up with you. We'll talk as we go."

Someone helped me into a saddle; my legs trembled in the stirrups as if I had ridden a thousand miles on end already. I imagine I must have fallen into a stupor; for I have only a vague impression of somebody's exculpating himself to me. As a matter of fact, Ralph, after having egged me on, in the intention of staying at home, had had qualms of conscience, and had come to the quarry. It

was he who had cried the watchword, "Snuff and enough," and who had held the whispered consultation. Carlos and Castro had waited in their hiding-place, having been spectators of the arrival of the runners and of my capture. I gathered this long afterwards. At that moment I was conscious only of the motion of the horse beneath me, of intense weariness, and of the voice of Ralph, who was lamenting his own cowardice.

"If it had come at any other time!" he kept on repeating. "But now, with Veronica to think of!----- You take me, Johnny, don't you?"

My companions rode silently. After we had passed the houses of a little village a heavy mist fell upon us, white, damp, and clogging. Ralph reined his horse beside mine.

"I'm sorry," he began again, "I'm miserably sorry I got you into this scrape. I swear I wouldn't have had it happen, not for a thousand pounds--not for ten."

"It doesn't matter," I said cheerfully.

"Ah, but," Rooksby said, "you'll have to leave the country for a time. Until I can arrange. I will. You can trust me."

"Oh, he'll have to leave the country, for sure," Rangsley said jovially, "if he wants to live it down. There's five-and-forty warrants out against me--but they dursent serve 'em. But he's not me."

"It's a miserable business," Ralph said. He had an air of the profoundest dejection. In the misty light he looked like a man mortally wounded, riding from a battle-field.

"Let him come with us," the musical voice of Carlos came through the mist in front of us. "He shall see the world a little."

"For God's sake hold your tongue!" Ralph answered him. "There's mischief enough. He shall go to France."

"Oh, let the young blade rip about the world for a year or two, squire," Rangsley's voice said from behind us.

In the end Ralph let me go with Carlos--actually across the sea, and to the West Indies. I begged and implored him; it seemed that now there was a chance for me to find my world of romance. And Ralph, who, though one of the most law-respecting of men, was not for the moment one of the most valorous, was wild to

wash his hands of the whole business. He did his best for me; he borrowed a goodly number of guineas from Rangley, who travelled with a bag of them at his saddle-bow, ready to pay his men their seven shillings a head for the run.

Ralph remembered, too--or I remembered for him--that he had estates and an agent in Jamaica, and he turned into the big inn at the junction of the London road to write a letter to his agent bidding him house me and employ me as an improver. For fear of compromising him we waited in the shadow of trees a furlong or two down the road. He came at a trot, gave me the letter, drew me aside, and began upbraiding himself again. The others rode onwards.

"Oh, it's all right," I said. "It's fine--it's fine. I'd have given fifty guineas for this chance this morning--and, Ralph, I say, you may tell Veronica why I'm going, but keep a shut mouth to my mother. Let her think I've run away--eh? Don't spoil your chance."

He was in such a state of repentance and flutter that he could not let me take a decent farewell. The sound of the others' horses had long died away down the hill when he began to tell me what he ought to have done.

"I knew it at once after I'd let you go. I ought to have kept you out of it. You came near being murdered. And to think of it--you, her brother--to be-----"

"Oh, it's all right," I said gayly, "it's all right. You've to stand by Veronica. I've no one to my back. Good-night, good-by."

I pulled my horse's head round and galloped down the hill. The main body had halted before setting out over the shingle to the shore. Rangley was waiting to conduct us into the town, where we should find a man to take us three fugitives out to the expected ship. We rode clattering aggressively through the silence of the long, narrow main street. Every now and then Carlos Riego coughed lamentably, but Tomas Castro rode in gloomy silence. There was a light here and there in a window, but not a soul stirring abroad. On the blind of an inn the shadow of a bearded man held the shadow of a rummer to its mouth.

"That'll be my uncle," Rangley said. "He'll be the man to do your errand." He called to one of the men behind. "Here, Joe Pilcher, do you go into the White Hart and drag my Uncle Tom out. Bring 'un up to me--to the nest."

Three doors further on we came to a halt, and got down from our horses.

Rangley knocked on a shutter-panel, two hard knocks with the crop and three with the naked fist. Then a lock clicked, heavy bars rumbled, and a chain rattled.

Rangsley pushed me through the doorway. A side door opened, and I saw into a lighted room filled with wreaths of smoke. A paunchy man in a bob wig, with a blue coat and Windsor buttons, holding a churchwarden pipe in his right hand and a pewter quart in his left, came towards us.

"Hullo, captain," he said, "you'll be too late with the lights, won't you?" He had a deprecatory air.

"Your watch is fast, Mr. Mayor," Rangsley answered surlily; "the tide won't serve for half an hour yet."

"Cht, cht," the other wheezed. "No offence. We respect you. But still, when one has a stake, one likes to know."

"My stake's all I have, and my neck," Rangsley said impatiently; "what's yours? A matter of fifty pun ten?... Why don't you make them bring they lanthorns?"

A couple of dark lanthorns were passed to Rangsley, who half-uncovered one, and lit the way up steep wooden stairs. We climbed up to a tiny cock-loft, of which the side towards the sea was all glazed.

"Now you sit there, on the floor," Rangsley commanded; "can't leave you below; the runners will be coming to the mayor for new warrants to-morrow, and he'd not like to have spent the night in your company."

He threw a casement open. The moon was hidden from us by clouds, but, a long way off, over the distant sea, there was an irregular patch of silver light, against which the chimneys of the opposite houses were silhouetted. The church clock began muffledly to chime the quarters behind us; then the hour struck--ten strokes.

Rangsley set one of his lanthorns on the window and twisted the top. He sent beams of yellow light shooting out to seawards. His hands quivered, and he was mumbling to himself under the influence of ungovernable excitement. His stakes were very large, and all depended on the flicker of those lanthorns out towards the men on the luggers that were hidden in the black expanse of the sea. Then he waited, and against the light of the window I could see him mopping his forehead with the sleeve of his coat; my heart began to beat softly and insisently--out of sympathy.

Suddenly, from the deep shadow of the cloud above the sea, a yellow light flashed silently cut--very small, very distant, very short-lived. Rangsley heaved a deep sigh and slapped me heavily on the shoulder.

"All serene, my buck," he said; "now let's see after you. I've half an hour. What's the ship?"

I was at a loss, but Carlos said out of the darkness, "The ship the Thames. My friend Señor Ortiz, of the Minories, said you would know."

"Oh, I know, I know," Rangsley said softly; and, indeed, he did know all that was to be known about smuggling out of the southern counties of people who could no longer inhabit them. The trade was a survival of the days of Jacobite plots. "And it's a hanging job, too. But it's no affair of mine." He stopped and reflected for an instant.

I could feel Carlos' eyes upon us, looking out of the thick darkness. A slight rustling came from the corner that hid Castro.

"She passes down channel to-night, then?" Rangsley said. "With this wind you'll want to be well out in the Bay at a quarter after eleven."

An abnormal scuffling, intermingled with snatches of jovial remonstrance, made itself heard from the bottom of the ladder. A voice called up through the hatch, "Here's your uncle, Squahre Jack," and a husky murmur corroborated.

"Be you drunk again, you old sinner?" Rangsley asked. "Listen to me.... Here's three men to be set aboard the Thames at a quarter after eleven."

A grunt came in reply.

Rangsley repeated slowly.

The grunt answered again.

"Here's three men to be set aboard the Thames at a quarter after eleven. . . ." Rangsley said again.

"Here's... a-cop... three men to be set aboard Thames at quarter after eleven," a voice hiccoughed back to us.

"Well, see you do it," Rangsley said. "He's as drunk as a king," he commented to us; "but when you've said a thing three times, he remembers--hark to him."

The drunken voice from below kept up a constant babble of, "Three men to be set aboard Thames... three men to be set . . ."

"He'll not stop saying that till he has you safe aboard," Rangsley said. He showed a glimmer of light down the ladder--Carlos and Castro descended. I caught sight below me of the silver head and the deep red ears of the drunken uncle of Rangsley. He had been one of the most redoubtable of the family, a man of immense strength and cunning, but a confirmed habit of consuming a pint and a half of gin a night had made him disinclined for the more arduous tasks of the trade. He limited his energies to working the underground passage, to the success of which his fox-like cunning, and intimate knowledge of the passing shipping, were indispensable. I was preparing to follow the others down the ladder when Rangsley touched my arm.

"I don't like your company," he said close behind my ear. "I know who they are. There were bills out for them this morning. I'd blow them, and take the reward, but for you and Squahre Rooksby. They're handy with their knives, too, I fancy. You mind me, and look to yourself with them. There's something unnatural."

His words had a certain effect upon me, and his manner perhaps more. A thing that was "unnatural" to Jack Rangsley--the man of darkness, who lived forever as if in the shadow of the gallows--was a thing to be avoided. He was for me nearly as romantic a figure as Carlos himself, but for his forbidding darkness, and he was a person of immense power. The silent flittings of lights that I had just seen, the answering signals from the luggers far out to sea, the enforced sleep of the towns and countryside whilst his plans were working out at night, had impressed me with a sense of awe. And his words sank into my spirit, and made me afraid for my future.

We followed the others downwards into a ground-floor room that was fitted up as a barber's shop. A rushlight was burning on a table. Rangsley took hold of a piece of wainscotting, part of the frame of a panel; he pulled it towards him, and, at the same moment, a glazed show-case full of razors and brushes swung noiselessly forward with an effect of the supernatural. A small opening, just big enough to take a man's body, revealed itself. We passed through it and up a sort of tunnel. The door at the other end, which was formed of panels, had a manger and straw crib attached to it on the outside, and let us into a horse's stall. We found ourselves in the stable of the inn.

"We don't use this passage for ourselves," Rangsley said. "Only the most looked up to need to--the justices and such like. But gallus birds like you and your company, it's best for us not to be seen in company with. Follow my uncle now. Good-night."

We went into the yard, under the pillars of the town hall, across the silent street,

through a narrow passage, and down to the sea. Old Rangsley reeled ahead of us swiftly, muttering, "Three men to be set aboard the Thames... quarter past eleven. Three men to be set aboard..." and in a few minutes we stood upon the shingle beside the idle sea, that was nearly at the full.