

CHAPTER FOUR

It was, I suppose, what I demanded of Fate--to be gently wafted into the position of a hero of romance, without rough hands at my throat. It is what we all ask, I suppose; and we get it sometimes in ten-minute snatches. I didn't know where I was going. It was enough for me to sail in and out of the patches of shadow that fell from the moon right above our heads.

We embarked, and, as we drew further out, the land turned to a shadow, spotted here and there with little lights. Behind us a cock crowed. The shingle crashed at intervals beneath the feet of a large body of men. I remembered the smugglers; but it was as if I had remembered them only to forget them forever. Old Rangsley, who steered with the sheet in his hand, kept up an unintelligible babble. Carlos and Castro talked under their breaths. Along the gunwale there was a constant ripple and gurgle. Suddenly old Rangsley began to sing; his voice was hoarse and drunken.

"When Harol' war in va--a--ded, An' fallin', lost his crownd, An' Normun
Willium wa--a--ded."

The water murmured without a pause, as if it had a million tiny facts to communicate in very little time. And then old Rangsley hove to, to wait for the ship, and sat half asleep, lurching over the tiller. He was a very, unreliable scoundrel. The boat leaked like a sieve. The wind freshened, and we three began to ask ourselves how it was going to end. There were no lights upon the sea.

At last, well out, a blue gleam caught our eyes; but by this time old Rangsley was helpless, and it fell to me to manage the boat. Carlos was of no use--he knew it, and, without saying a word, busied himself in bailing the water out. But Castro, I was surprised to notice, knew more than I did about a boat, and, maimed as he was, made himself useful.

"To me it looks as if we should drown," Carlos said at one point, very quietly. "I am sorry for you, Juan."

"And for yourself, too," I answered, feeling very hopeless, and with a dogged grimness.

"Just now, my young cousin, I feel as if I should not mind dying under the water," he remarked with a sigh, but without ceasing to bail for a moment.

"Ah, you are sorry to be leaving home, and your friends, and Spain, and your fine adventures," I answered.

The blue flare showed a very little nearer. There was nothing to be done but talk and wait.

"No; England," he answered in a tone full of meaning--"things in England--people there. One person at least."

To me his words and his smile seemed to imply a bitter irony; but they were said very earnestly.

Castro had hauled the helpless form of old Rangsley forward. I caught him muttering savagely:

"I could kill that old man!"

He did not want to be drowned; neither assuredly did I. But it was not fear so much as a feeling of dreariness and disappointment that had come over me, the sudden feeling that I was going not to adventure, but to death; that here was not romance, but an end--a disenchanting surprise that it should soon be all over.

We kept a grim silence. Further out in the bay, we were caught in a heavy squall. Sitting by the tiller, I got as much out of her as I knew how. We would go as far as we could before the run was over. Carlos bailed unceasingly, and without a word of complaint, sticking to his self-appointed task as if in very truth he were careless of life. A feeling came over me that this, indeed, was the elevated and the romantic. Perhaps he was tired of his life; perhaps he really regretted what he left behind him in England, or somewhere else--some association, some woman. But he, at least, if we went down together, would go gallantly, and without complaint, at the end of a life with associations, movements, having lived and regretted. I should disappear in--gloriously on the very threshold.

Castro, standing up unsteadily, growled, "We may do it yet! See, señor!"

The blue gleam was much larger--it flared smokily up towards the sky. I made out ghastly parallelograms of a ship's sails high above us, and at last many faces peering unseeingly over the rail in our direction. We all shouted together.

I may say that it was thanks to me that we reached the ship. Our boat went down under us whilst I was tying a rope under Carlos' arms. He was standing up with the baler still in his hand. On board, the women passengers were screaming, and as I clung desperately to the rope that was thrown me, it struck me oddly that I

had never before heard so many women's voices at the same time. Afterwards, when I stood on the deck, they began laughing at old Rangley, who held forth in a thunderous voice, punctuated by hiccoughs:

"They carried I aboard--a cop--theer lugger and sinks I in the cold, co--old sea."

It mortified me excessively that I should be tacked to his tail and exhibited to a number of people, and I had a sudden conviction of my small importance. I had expected something altogether different--an audience sympathetically interested in my desire for a passage to the West Indies; instead of which people laughed while I spoke in panting jerks, and the water dripped out of my clothes. After I had made it clear that I wanted to go with Carlos, and could pay for my passage, I was handed down into the steerage, where a tallow candle burnt in a thick, blue atmosphere. I was stripped and filled with some fiery liquid, and fell asleep. Old Rangley was sent ashore with the pilot.

It was a new and strange life to me, opening there suddenly enough. The Thames was one of the usual West Indiamen; but to me even the very ropes and spars, the sea, and the unbroken dome of the sky, had a rich strangeness. Time passed lazily and gliding. I made more fully the acquaintance of my companions, but seemed to know them no better. I lived with Carlos in the cabin--Castro in the half-deck; but we were all three pretty constantly together, and they being the only Spaniards on board, we were more or less isolated from the other passengers.

Looking at my companions at times, I had vague misgivings. It was as if these two had fascinated me to the verge of some danger. Sometimes Castro, looking up, uttered vague ejaculations. Carlos pushed his hat back and sighed. They had preoccupations, cares, interests in which they let me have no part.

Castro struck me as absolutely ruffianly. His head was knotted in a red, white-spotted handkerchief; his grizzled beard was tangled; he wore a black and rusty cloak, ragged at the edges, and his feet were often bare; at his side would lie his wooden right hand. As a rule, the place of his forearm was taken by a long, thin, steel blade, that he was forever sharpening.

Carlos talked with me, telling me about his former life and his adventures. The other passengers he discountenanced by a certain coldness of manner that made me ashamed of talking to them. I respected him so; he was so wonderful to me then. Castro I detested; but I accepted their relationship without in the least understanding how Carlos, with his fine grain, his high soul--I gave him credit for a high soul--could put up with the squalid ferocity with which I credited Castro. It seemed to hang in the air round the grotesque ragged-ness of the saturnine

brown man.

Carlos had made Spain too hot to hold him in those tortuous intrigues of the Army of the Faith and Bourbon troops and Italian legions. From what I could understand, he must have played fast and loose in an insolent manner. And there was some woman offended. There was a gayness and gallantry in that part of it. He had known the very spirit of romance, and now he was sailing gallantly out to take up his inheritance from an uncle who was a great noble, owning the greater part of one of the Intendencias of Cuba.

"He is a very old man, I hear," Carlos said--"a little doting, and having need of me."

There were all the elements of romance about Carlos' story--except the actual discomforts of the ship in which we were sailing. He himself had never been in Cuba or seen his uncle; but he had, as I have indicated, ruined himself in one way or another in Spain, and it had come as a God-send to him when his uncle had sent Tomas Castro to bring him to Cuba, to the town of Rio Medio.

"The town belongs to my uncle. He is very rich; a Grand d'Espagne . . . everything; but he is now very old, and has left Havana to die in his palace in his own town. He has an only daughter, a Dona Seraphina, and I suppose that if I find favour in his eyes I shall marry her, and inherit my uncle's great riches; I am the only one that is left of the family to inherit." He waved his hand and smiled a little. "Vaya; a little of that great wealth would be welcome. If I had had a few pence more there would have been none of this worry, and I should not have been on this dirty ship in these rags." He looked down good-humouredly at his clothes.

"But," I said, "how do you come to be in a scrape at all?"

He laughed a little proudly.

"In a scrape?" he said. "I... I am in none. It is Tomas Castro there." He laughed affectionately. "He is as faithful as he is ugly," he said; "but I fear he has been a villain, too.... What do I know? Over there in my uncle's town, there are some villains--you know what I mean, one must not speak too loudly on this ship. There is a man called O'Brien, who mismanages my uncle's affairs. What do I know? The good Tomas has been in some villainy that is no affair of mine. He is a good friend and a faithful dependent of my family's. He certainly had that man's watch--the man we met by evil chance at Liverpool, a man who came from Jamaica. He had bought it--of a bad man, perhaps, I do not ask. It was Castro your police wished to take. But I, bon Dieu, do you think I would take watches?"

I certainly did not think he had taken a watch; but I did not relinquish the idea that he, in a glamorous, romantic way, had been a pirate. Rooksby had certainly hinted as much in his irritation.

He lost none of his romantic charm in my eyes. The fact that he was sailing in uncomfortable circumstances detracted little; nor did his clothes, which, at the worst, were better than any I had ever had. And he wore them with an air and a grace. He had probably been in worse circumstances when campaigning with the Army of the Faith in Spain. And there was certainly the uncle with the romantic title and the great inheritance, and the cousin--the Miss Seraphina, whom he would probably marry. I imagined him an aristocratic scapegrace, a corsair--it was the Byronic period then--sailing out to marry a sort of shimmering princess with hair like Veronica's, bright golden, and a face like that of a certain keeper's daughter. Carlos, however, knew nothing about his cousin; he cared little more, as far as I could tell. "What can she be to me since I have seen your...?" he said once, and then stopped, looking at me with a certain tender irony. He insisted, though, that his aged uncle was in need of him. As for Castro--he and his rags came out of a life of sturt and strife, and I hoped he might die by treachery. He had undoubtedly been sent by the uncle across the seas to find Carlos and bring him out of Europe; there was something romantic in that mission. He was now a dependent of the Riego family, but there were unfathomable depths in that tubby little man's past. That he had gone to Russia at the tail of the Grande Armée, one could not help believing. He had been most likely in the grand army of sutlers and camp-followers. He could talk convincingly of the cold, and of the snows and his escape. And from his allusions one could get glimpses of what he had been before and afterwards--apparently everything that was questionable in a secularly disturbed Europe; no doubt somewhat of a bandit; a guerrillero in the sixes and sevens; with the Army of the Faith near the French border, later on.

There had been room and to spare for that sort of pike, in the muddy waters, during the first years of the century. But the waters were clearing, and now the good Castro had been dodging the gallows in the Antilles or in Mexico. In his heroic moods he would swear that his arm had been cut off at Somo Sierra; swear it with a great deal of asseveration, making one see the Polish lancers charging the gunners, being cut down, and his own sword arm falling suddenly.

Carlos, however, used to declare with affectionate cynicism that the arm had been broken by the cudgel of a Polish peasant while Castro was trying to filch a pig from a stable.... "I cut his throat out, though," Castro would grumble darkly; "so, like that, and it matters very little--it is even an improvement. See, I put on my blade. See, I transfix you that fly there.... See how astonished he was. He did never expect that." He had actually impaled a crawling cockroach. He spent his days cooking extraordinary messes, crouching for hours over a little charcoal

brazier that he lit surreptitiously in the back of his bunk, making substitutes for eternal gaspachos.

All these things, if they deepened the romance of Carlos' career, enhanced, also, the mystery. I asked him one day, "But why do you go to Jamaica at all if you are bound for Cuba?"

He looked at me, smiling a little mournfully.

"Ah, Juan mio," he said, "Spain is not like your England, unchanging and stable. The party who reign to-day do not love me, and they are masters in Cuba as in Spain. But in his province my uncle rules alone. There I shall be safe." He was condescending to roll some cigarettes for Tomas, whose wooden hand incommoded him, and he tossed a fragment of tobacco to the wind with a laugh. "In Jamaica there is a merchant, a Señor Ramon; I have letters to him, and he shall find me a conveyance to Rio Medio, my uncle's town. He is an *quiliado*."

He laughed again. "It is not easy to enter that place, Juanino."

There was certainly some mystery about that town of his uncle's. One night I overheard him say to Castro:

"Tell me, O my Tomas, would it be safe to take this caballero, my cousin, to Rio Medio?"

Castro paused, and then murmured gruffly:

"Señor, unless that Irishman is consulted beforehand, or the English lord would undertake to join with the picaroons, it is very assuredly not safe."

Carlos made a little exclamation of mild astonishment.

"Pero? Is it so bad as that in my uncle's own town?"

Tomas muttered something that I did not catch, and then:

"If the English caballero committed indiscretions, or quarrelled--and all these people quarrel, why, God knows--that Irish devil could hang many persons, even myself, or take vengeance on your worship."

Carlos was silent as if in a reverie. At last he said:

"But if affairs are like this, it would be well to have one more with us. The

caballero, my cousin, is very strong and of great courage."

Castro grunted, "Oh, of a courage! But as the proverb says, 'If you set an Englishman by a hornets' nest they shall not remain long within.'":

After that I avoided any allusion to Cuba, because the thing, think as I would about it, would not grow clear. It was plain that something illegal was going on there, or how could "that Irish devil," whoever he was, have power to hang Tomas and be revenged on Carlos? It did not affect my love for Carlos, though, in the weariness of this mystery, the passage seemed to drag a little. And it was obvious enough that Carlos was unwilling or unable to tell anything about what pre-, occupied him.

I had noticed an intimacy spring up between the ship's second mate and Tomas, who was, it seemed to me, forever engaged in long confabulations in the man's cabin, and, as much to make talk as for any other reason, I asked Carlos if he had noticed his dependent's familiarity. It was noticeable because Castro held aloof from every other soul on board. Carlos answered me with one of his nervous and angry smiles.

"Ah, Juan mine, do not ask too many questions! I wish you could come with me all the way, but I cannot tell you all I know. I do not even myself know all. It seems that the man is going to leave the ship in Jamaica, and has letters for that Señor Ramon, the merchant, even as I have. Vaya; more I cannot tell you."

This struck me as curious, and a little of the whole mystery seemed from that time to attach to the second mate, who before had been no more to me than a long, sallow Nova Scotian, with a disagreeable intonation and rather offensive manners. I began to watch him, desultorily, and was rather startled by something more than a suspicion that he himself was watching me. On one occasion in particular I seemed to observe this. The second mate was lankily stalking the deck, his hands in his pockets. As he paused in his walk to spit into the sea beside me, Carlos said:

"And you, my Juan, what will you do in this Jamaica?"

The sense that we were approaching land was already all over the ship. The second mate leered at me enigmatically, and moved slowly away. I said that I was going to the Horton Estates, Rooksby's, to learn planting under a Mr. Macdonald, the agent. Carlos shrugged his shoulders. I suppose I had spoken with some animation.

"Ah," he said, with his air of great wisdom and varied experience, of

disillusionment, "it will be much the same as it has been at your home--after the first days. Hard work and a great sameness." He began to cough violently.

I said bitterly enough, "Yes. It will be always the same with me. I shall never see life. You've seen all that there is to see, so I suppose you do not mind settling down with an old uncle in a palace."

He answered suddenly, with a certain darkness of manner, "That is as God wills. Who knows? Perhaps life, even in my uncle's palace, will not be so safe."

The second mate was bearing down on us again.

I said jocularly, "Why, when I get very tired of life at Horton Pen, I shall come to see you in your uncle's town."

Carlos had another of his fits of coughing.

"After all, we are kinsmen. I dare say you would give me a bed," I went on.

The second mate was quite close to us then.

Carlos looked at me with an expression of affection that a little shamed my lightness of tone:

"I love you much more than a kinsman, Juan," he said. "I wish you could come with me. I try to arrange it. Later, perhaps, I may be dead. I am very ill."

He was undoubtedly ill. Campaigning in Spain, exposure in England in a rainy time, and then the ducking when we came on board, had done him no good. He looked moodily at the sea.

"I wish you could come. I will try-----"

The mate had paused, and was listening quite unaffectedly, behind Carlos' back.

A moment after Carlos half turned and regarded him with a haughty stare.

He whistled and walked away.

Carlos muttered something that I did not catch about "spies of that pestilent Irishman." Then:

"I will not selfishly take you into any more dangers," he said. "But life on a sugar

plantation is not fit for you."

I felt glad and flattered that a personage so romantic should deem me a fit companion for himself. He went forward as if with some purpose.

Some days afterwards the second mate sent for me to his cabin. He had been on the sick list, and he was lying in his bunk, stripped to the waist, one arm and one leg touching the floor. He raised himself slowly when I came in, and spat. He had in a pronounced degree the Nova Scotian peculiarities and accent, and after he had shaved, his face shone like polished leather.

"Hallo!" he said. "See heeyur, young Kemp, does your neck just itch to be stretched?"

I looked at him with mouth and eyes agape.

He spat again, and waved a claw towards the forward bulkhead.

"They'll do it for yeh," he said. "You're such a green goose, it makes me sick a bit. You hev'n't reckoned out the chances, not quite. It's a kind of dead reckoning yeh hev'n't had call to make. Eh?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, bewildered.

He looked at me, grinning, half naked, with amused contempt, for quite a long time, and at last offered sardonically to open my eyes for me.

I said nothing.

"Do you know what will happen to you," he asked, "ef yeh don't get quit of that Carlos of yours?"

I was surprised into muttering that I didn't know.

"I can tell yeh," he continued. "Yeh will get hanged."

By that time I was too amazed to get angry. I simply suspected the Blue Nose of being drunk. But he glared at me so soberly that next moment I felt frightened.

"Hanged by the neck," he repeated; and then added, "Young fellow, you scoot. Take a fool's advice, and scoot. That Castro is a blame fool, anyhow. Yeh want men for that job. Men, I tell you." He slapped his bony breast.

I had no idea that he could look so ferocious. His eyes fascinated me, and he opened his cavernous mouth as if to swallow me. His lantern jaws snapped without a sound. He seemed to change his mind.

"I am done with yeh," he said, with a sort of sinister restraint. He rose to his feet, and, turning his back to me, began to shave, squinting into a broken looking-glass.

I had not the slightest inkling of his meaning. I only knew that going out of his berth was like escaping from the dark lair of a beast into a sunlit world. There is no denying that his words, and still more his manner, had awakened in me a sense of insecurity that had no precise object, for it was manifestly absurd and impossible to suspect my friend Carlos. Moreover, hanging was a danger so recondit, and an eventuality so extravagant, as to make the whole thing ridiculous. And yet I remembered how unhappy I felt, how inexplicably unhappy. Presently the reason was made clear. I was homesick. I gave no further thought to the second mate. I looked at the harbour we were entering, and thought of the home I had left so eagerly. After all, I was no more than a boy, and even younger in mind than in body.

Queer-looking boats crawled between the shores like tiny water beetles. One headed out towards us, then another. I did not want them to reach us. It was as if I did not wish my solitude to be disturbed, and I was not pleased with the idea of going ashore. A great ship, floating high on the water, black and girt with the two broad yellow streaks of her double tier of guns, glided out slowly from beyond a cluster of shipping in the bay. She passed without a hail, going out under her topsails with a flag at the fore. Her lofty spars overtopped our masts immensely, and I saw the men in her rigging looking down on our decks. The only sounds that came out of her were the piping of boatswain's calls and the tramping of feet. Imagining her to be going home, I felt a great desire to be on board. Ultimately, as it turned out, I went home in that very ship, but then it was too late. I was another man by that time, with much queer knowledge and other desires. Whilst I was looking and longing I heard Carlos' voice behind me asking one of our sailors what ship it was.

"Don't you know a flagship when you see it?" a voice grumbled surlily. "Admiral Rowley's," it continued. Then it rumbled out some remarks about "pirates, vermin, coast of Cuba."

Carlos came to the side, and looked after the man-of-war in the distance.

"You could help us," I heard him mutter.