

CHAPTER FIVE

There was a lad called Barnes, a steerage passenger of about my own age, a raw, red-headed Northumbrian yokel, going out as a recruit to one of the West Indian regiments. He was a serious, strenuous youth, and I had talked a little with him at odd moments. In my great loneliness I went to say good-bye to him after I had definitely parted with Carlos.

I had been in our cabin. A great bustle of shore-going, of leave-taking had sprung up all over the ship. Carlos and Castro had entered with a tall, immobile, gold-spectacled Spaniard, dressed all in white, and with a certain air of noticing and attentive deference, bowing a little as he entered the cabin in earnest conference with Tomas Castro. Carlos had preceded them with a certain nonchalance, and the Spaniard--it was the Señor Ramon, the merchant I had heard of--regarded him as if with interested curiosity. With Tomas he seemed already familiar. He stood in the doorway, against the strong light, bowing a little.

With a certain courtesy, touched with indifference, Carlos made him acquainted with me. Ramon turned his searching, quietly analytic gaze upon me.

"But is the caballero going over, too?" he asked.

Carlos said, "No. I think not, now."

And at that moment the second mate, shouldering his way through a white-clothed crowd of shore people, made up behind Señor Ramon. He held a letter in his hand.

"I am going over," he said, in his high nasal voice, and with a certain ferocity.

Ramon looked round apprehensively.

Carlos said, "The señor, my cousin, wishes for a Mr. Macdonald. You know him, señor?"

Ramon made a dry gesture of perfect acquaintance. "I think I have seen him just now," he said. "I will make inquiries."

All three of them had followed him, and became lost in the crowd. It was then, not knowing whether I should ever see Carlos again, and with a desperate, unhappy feeling of loneliness, that I had sought out Barnes in the dim immensity of the

steerage.

In the square of wan light that came down the scuttle he was cording his hair-trunk--unemotional and very matter-of-fact. He began to talk in an everyday voice about his plans. An uncle was going to meet him, and to house him for a day or two before he went to the barracks.

"Mebbe we'll meet again," he said. "I'll be here many years, I think."

He shouldered his trunk and climbed unromantically up the ladder. He said he would look for Macdonald for me.

It was absurd to suppose that the strange ravings of the second mate had had an effect on me. "Hanged! Pirates!" Was Carlos really a pirate, or Castro, his humble friend? It was vile of me to suspect Carlos. A couple of men, meeting by the scuttle, began to talk loudly, every word coming plainly to my ears in the stillness of my misery, and the large deserted steerage. One of them, new from home, was asking questions. Another answered:

"Oh, I lost half a seroon the last voyage--the old thing."

"Haven't they routed out the scoundrels yet?" the other asked.

The first man lowered his voice. I caught only that "the admiral was an old fool--no good for this job. He's found out the name of the place the pirates come from--Rio Medio. That's the place, only he can't get in at it with his three-deckers. You saw his flagship?"

Rio Medio was the name of the town to which Carlos was going--which his uncle owned. They moved away from above.

What was I to believe? What could this mean? But the second mate's, "Scoot, young man," seemed to come to my ears like the blast of a trumpet. I became suddenly intensely anxious to find Macdonald--to see no more of Carlos.

From above came suddenly a gruff voice in Spanish. "Señor, it would be a great folly."

Tomas Castro was descending the ladder gingerly. He was coming to fetch his bundle. I went hastily into the distance of the vast, dim cavern of spare room that served for the steerage.

"I want him very much," Carlos said. "I like him. He would be of help to us."

"It's as your worship wills," Castro said gruffly. They were both at the bottom of the ladder. "But an Englishman there would work great mischief. And this youth---"

"I will take him, Tomas," Carlos said, laying a hand on his arm.

"Those others will think he is a spy. I know them," Castro muttered. "They will hang him, or work some devil's mischief. You do not know that Irish judge--the canaille, the friend of priests."

"He is very brave. He will not fear," Carlos said.

I came suddenly forward. "I will not go with you," I said, before I had reached them even.

Castro started back as if he had been stung, and caught at the wooden hand that sheathed his steel blade.

"Ah, it is you, Señor," he said, with an air of relief and dislike. Carlos, softly and very affectionately, began inviting me to go to his uncle's town. His uncle, he was sure, would welcome me. Jamaica and a planter's life were not fit for me.

I had not then spoken very loudly, or had not made my meaning very clear. I felt a great desire to find Macdonald, and a simple life that I could understand.

"I am not going with you," I said, very loudly this time.

He stopped at once. Through the scuttle of the half-deck we heard a hubbub of voices, of people exchanging greetings, of Christian names called out joyously. A tumultuous shuffling of feet went on continuously over our heads. The ship was crowded with people from the shore. Perhaps Macdonald was amongst them, even looking for me.

"Ah, amigo mio, but you must now," said Carlos gently--"you must-----" And, looking me straight in the face with a still, penetrating glance of his big, romantic eyes, "It is a good life," he whispered seductively, "and I like you, John Kemp. You are young--very young yet. But I love you very much for your own sake, and for the sake of one I shall never see again."

He fascinated me. He was all eyes in the dusk, standing in a languid pose just clear of the shaft of light that fell through the scuttle in a square patch.

I lowered my voice, too. "What life?" I asked.

"Life in my uncle's palace," he said, so sweetly and persuasively that the suggestiveness of it caused a thrill in me.

His uncle could nominate me to posts of honour fit for a caballero.

I seemed to wake up. "Your uncle the pirate!" I cried, and was amazed at my own words.

Tomas Castro sprang up, and placed his rough, hot hand over my lips.

"Be quiet, John Kemp, you fool!" he hissed with sudden energy.

He had spruced himself, but I seemed to see the rags still nutter about him. He had combed out his beard, but I could not forget the knots that had been in it.

"I told your worship how foolish and wrong-headed these English are," he said sardonically to Carlos. And then to me, "If the senor speaks loudly again, I shall kill him."

He was evidently very frightened of something.

Carlos, silent as an apparition at the foot of the ladder, put a finger to his lips and glanced upwards.

Castro writhed his whole body, and I stepped backwards. "I know what Rio Medio is," I said, not very loudly. "It is a nest of pirates."

Castro crept towards me again on the points of his toes. "Señor Don Juan Kemp, child of the devil," he hissed, looking very much frightened, "you must die!"

I smiled. He was trembling all over. I could hear the talking and laughing that went on under the break of the poop. Two women were kissing, with little cries, near the hatchway. I could hear them distinctly.

Tomas Castro dropped his ragged cloak with a grandiose gesture.

"By my hand!" he added with difficulty.

He was really very much alarmed. Carlos was gazing up the hatch. I was ready to laugh at the idea of dying by Tomas Castro's hand while, within five feet of me, people were laughing and kissing. I should have laughed had I not suddenly felt

his hand on my throat. I kicked his shins hard, and fell backwards over a chest. He went back a step or two, flourished his arm, beat his chest, and turned furiously upon Carlos.

"He will get us murdered," he said. "Do you think we are safe here? If these people here heard that name they wouldn't wait to ask who your worship is. They would tear us to pieces in an instant. I tell you--moi, Tomas Castro--he will ruin us, this white fool-----"

Carlos began to cough, shaken speechless as if by an invisible devil. Castro's eyes ran furtively all round him, then he looked at me. He made an extraordinary swift motion with his right hand, and I saw that he was facing me with a long steel blade displayed. Carlos continued to cough. The thing seemed odd, laughable still. Castro began to parade round me: it was as if he were a cock performing its saltatory rites before attacking. There was the same tenseness of muscle. He stepped with extraordinary care on the points of his toes, and came to a stop about four feet from me. I began to wonder what Rooksby would have thought of this sort of thing, to wonder why Castro himself found it necessary to crouch for such a long time. Up above, the hum of many people, still laughing, still talking, faded a little out of mind. I understood, horribly, how possible it would be to die within those few feet of them. Castro's eyes were dusky yellow, the pupils a great deal inflated, the lines of his mouth very hard and drawn immensely tight. It seemed extraordinary that he should put so much emotion into such a very easy killing. I had my back against the bulkhead, it felt very hard against my shoulder-blades. I had no dread, only a sort of shrinking from the actual contact of the point, as one shrinks from being tickled. I opened my mouth. I was going to shriek a last, despairing call, to the light and laughter of meetings above when Carlos, still shaken, with one white hand pressed very hard upon his chest, started forward and gripped his hand round Castro's steel. He began to whisper in the other's hairy ear. I caught:

"You are a fool. He will not make us to be molested, he is my kinsman."

Castro made a reluctant gesture towards Barnes' chest that lay between us.

"We could cram him into that," he said.

"Oh, bloodthirsty fool," Carlos answered, recovering his breath; "is it always necessary to wash your hands in blood? Are we not in enough danger? Up--up! Go see if the boat is yet there. We must go quickly; up--up-----" He waved his hand towards the scuttle.

"But still," Castro said. He was reluctantly fitting his wooden hand upon the blue

steel. He sent a baleful yellow glare into my eyes, and stooped to pick up his ragged cloak.

"Up--mount!" Carlos commanded.

Castro muttered, "Vamos," and began clumsily to climb the ladder, like a bale of rags being hauled from above. Carlos placed his foot on the steps, preparing to follow him. He turned his head round towards me, his hand extended, a smile upon his lips.

"Juan," he said, "let us not quarrel. You are very young; you cannot understand these things; you cannot weigh them; you have a foolish idea in your head. I wished you to come with us because I love you, Juan. Do you think I wish you evil? You are true and brave, and our families are united." He sighed suddenly.

"I do not want to quarrel!" I said. "I don't."

I did not want to quarrel; I wanted more to cry. I was very lonely, and he was going away. Romance was going out of my life.

He added musically, "You even do not understand. There is someone else who speaks for you to me, always--someone else. But one day you will. I shall come back for you--one day." He looked at me and smiled. It stirred unknown depths of emotion in me. I would have gone with him, then, had he asked me. "One day," he repeated, with an extraordinary cadence of tone.

His hand was grasping mine; it thrilled me like a woman's; he stood shaking it very gently.

"One day," he said, "I shall repay what I owe you. I wished you with me, because I go into some danger. I wanted you. Good-by. Hasta mas ver."

He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the cheek, then climbed away. I felt that the light of Romance was going out of my life. As we reached the top of the ladder, somebody began to call harshly, startlingly. I heard my own name and the words, "mahn ye were speerin' after."

The light was obscured, the voice began clamouring insistently.

"John Kemp, Johnnie Kemp, noo. Here's the mahn ye were speerin' after. Here's Macdonald."

It was the voice of Barnes, and the voice of the every day. I discovered that I had

been tremendously upset. The pulses in my temples were throbbing, and I wanted to shut my eyes--to sleep! I was tired; Romance had departed. Barnes and the Macdonald he had found for me represented all the laborious insects of the world; all the ants who are forever hauling immensely heavy and immensely unimportant burdens up weary hillocks, down steep places, getting nowhere and doing nothing.

Nevertheless I hurried up, stumbling at the hatchway against a man who was looking down. He said nothing at all, and I was dazed by the light. Barnes remarked hurriedly, "This 'll be your Mr. Macdonald"; and, turning his back on me, forgot my existence. I felt more alone than ever. The man in front of me held his head low, as if he wished to butt me.

I began breathlessly to tell him I had a letter from "my--my--Rooksby--brother-in-law--Ralph Rooks-by"--I was panting as if I had run a long way. He said nothing at all. I fumbled for the letter in an inner pocket of my waistcoat, and felt very shy. Macdonald maintained a portentous silence; his enormous body was enveloped rather than clothed in a great volume of ill-fitting white stuff; he held in his hand a great umbrella with a vivid green lining. His face was very pale, and had the leaden transparency of a boiled artichoke; it was fringed by a red beard streaked with gray, as brown flood-water is with foam. I noticed at last that the reason for his presenting his forehead to me was an incredible squint--a squint that gave the idea that he was performing some tortuous and defiant feat with the muscles of his neck.

He maintained an air of distrustful inscrutability. The hand which took my letter was very large, very white, and looked as if it would feel horribly flabby. With the other he put on his nose a pair of enormous mother-of-pearl-framed spectacles--things exactly like those of a cobra's--and began to read. He had said precisely nothing at all. It was for him and what he represented that I had thrown over Carlos and what he represented. I felt that I deserved to be received with acclamation. I was not. He read the letter very deliberately, swaying, umbrella and all, with the slow movement of a dozing elephant. Once he crossed his eyes at me, meditatively, above the mother-of-pearl rims. He was so slow, so deliberate, that I own I began to wonder whether Carlos and Castro were still on board. It seemed to be at least half an hour before Macdonald cleared his throat, with a sound resembling the coughing of a defective pump, and a mere trickle of a voice asked:

"Hwhat evidence have ye of identitee?"

I hadn't any at all, and began to finger my buttonholes as shamefaced as a pauper before a Board. The certitude dawned upon me suddenly that Carlos,

even if he would consent to swear to me, would prejudice my chances.

I cannot help thinking that I came very near to being cast adrift upon the streets of Kingston. To my asseverations Macdonald returned nothing but a series of minute "humphs." I don't know what overcame his scruples; he had shown no signs of yielding, but suddenly turning on his heel made a motion with one of his flabby white hands. I understood it to mean that I was to follow him aft.

The decks were covered with a jabbering turmoil of negroes with muscular arms and brawny shoulders. All their shining black faces seem to be momentarily gashed open to show rows of white teeth, and were spotted with inlaid eyeballs. The sounds coming from them were a bewildering noise. They were hauling baggage about aimlessly. A large soft bundle of bedding nearly took me off my legs. There wasn't room for emotion. Macdonald laid about him with the handle of the umbrella a few inches from the deck; but the passage that he made for himself closed behind him.

Suddenly, in the pushing and hurrying, I came upon a little clear space beside a pile of boxes. Stooping over them was the angular figure of Nichols, the second mate. He looked up at me, screwing his yellow eyes together.

"Going ashore," he asked, "long of that Puffing Billy?"

"What business is it of yours" I mumbled sulkily.

Sudden and intense threatening came into his yellow eyes:

"Don't you ever come to you know where," he said; "I don't want no spies on what I do. There's a man there'll crack your little backbone if he catches you. Don't yeh come now. Never."