

CHAPTER THREE

The room was very lofty and coldly dim; there were great bars in front of the begrimed windows. It was very bare, containing only a long black table, some packing cases, and half a dozen rocking chairs. Of these, five were very new and one very old, black and heavy, with a green leather seat and a coat of arms worked on its back cushions. There were little heaps of mahogany sawdust here and there on the dirty tiled floor, and a pile of sacking in one corner. Beneath a window the flap of an open trap-door half hid a large green damp-stain; a deep recess in the wall yawned like a cavern, and had two or three tubs in the right corner; a man with a blond head, slightly bald as if he had been tonsured, was rocking gently in one of the new chairs.

Opposite him, with his aged face towards us, sat the old Don asleep in the high chair. His delicate white hands lay along the arms, one of them holding a gold vinaigrette; his black, silver-headed cane was between his silk-stockinged legs. The diamond buckles of his shoes shot out little vivid rays, even in that gloomy place. The young girl was sitting with her hands to her temples and her elbows on the long table, minutely examining the motionlessness of a baby lizard, a tiny thing with golden eyes, whom fear seemed to have turned into stone.

We entered quietly, and after a moment she looked up candidly into my eyes, and placed her finger on her lips, motioning her head towards her father. She placed her hand in mine, and whispered very clearly:

"Be welcome, my English cousin," and then dropped her eyes again to the lizard.

She knew all about me from Carlos. The man of whom I had seen only the top of his head, turned his chair suddenly and glinted at me with little blue eyes. He was rather small and round, with very firm flesh, and very white, plump hands. He was dressed in the black clothes of a Spanish judge. On his round face there was always a smile like that which hangs around the jaws of a pike--only more humorous. He bowed a little exaggeratedly to me and said:

"Ah, ye are that famous Mr. Kemp."

I said that I imagined him the more famous Señor Juez O'Brien.

"It's little use saying ye arren't famous," he said. His voice had the faint, infinitely sweet twang of certain Irishry; a thing as delicate and intangible as the scent of lime flowers. "Our noble friend"--he indicated Carlos with a little flutter of one

white hand--"has told me what make of a dare-devil gallant ye are; breaking the skulls of half the Bow Street runners for the sake of a friend in distress. Well, I honour ye for it; I've done as much myself." He added, "In the old days," and sighed.

"You mean in the '98," I said, a little insolently.

O'Brien's eyes twinkled. He had, as a matter of fact, nearly lost his neck in the Irish fiasco, either in Clonmel or Sligo, bolting violently from the English dragoons, in the mist, to a French man-of-war's boats in the bay. To him, even though he was now a judge in Cuba, it was an episode of heroism of youth--of romance, in fact. So that, probably, he did not resent my mention of it. I certainly wanted to resent something that was slighting in his voice, and patronizing in his manner.

The old Don slumbered placidly, his face turned up to the distant begrimed ceiling.

"Now, I'll make you a fair offer," O'Brien said suddenly, after an intent study of the insolent glance that I gave him. I disliked him because I knew nothing about the sort of man he was. He was, as a matter of fact, more alien to me than Carlos. And he gave me the impression that, if perhaps he were not absolutely the better man, he could still make a fool of me, or at least make me look like a fool.

"I'm told you are a Separationist," he said. "Well, it's like me. I am an Irishman; there has been a price on my head in another island. And there are warrants out against you here for assaulting the admiral. We can work together, and there's nothing low in what I have in mind for you."

He had heard frequently from Carlos that I was a desperate and aristocratically lawless young man, who had lived in a district entirely given up to desperate and murderous smugglers. But this was the first I had heard definitely of warrants against me in Jamaica. That, no doubt, he had heard from Ramon, who knew everything. In all this little sardonic Irishman said to me, it seemed the only thing worth attention. It stuck in my mind while, in persuasive tones, and with airy fluency, he discoursed of the profits that could be made, nowadays, in arming privateers under the Mexican flag. He told me I needn't be surprised at their being fitted out in a Spanish colony. "There's more than one aspect to disloyalty like this," said he dispassionately, but with a quick wink contrasting with his tone.

Spain resented our recognition of their rebellious colonies. And with the same cool persuasiveness, relieved by humorous smiles, he explained that the loyal

Spaniards of the Ever Faithful Island thought there was no sin in doing harm to the English, even under the Mexican flag, whose legal existence they did not recognize.

"Mind ye, it's an organized thing, I have something to say in it. It hurts Mr. Canning's Government at home, the curse of Cromwell on him and them. They will be dropping some of their own colonies directly. And as you are a Separationist, small blame to you, and I am an Irishman, we shan't cry our eyes out over it. Come, Mr. Kemp, 'tis all for the good of the Cause.... And there's nothing low. You are a gentleman, and I wouldn't propose anything that was. The very best people in Havana are interested in the matter. Our schooners lie in Rio Medio, but I can't be there all the time myself."

Surprise deprived me of speech. I glanced at Carlos. He was watching us inscrutably. The young girl touched the lizard gently, but it was too frightened to move. O'Brien, with shrewd glances, rocked his chair.... What did I want? he inquired. To see life? What he proposed was the life for a fine young fellow like me. Moreover, I was half Scotch. Had I forgotten the wrongs of my own country? Had I forgotten the '45?

"You'll have heard tell of a Scotch Chief Justice whose son spent in Amsterdam the money his father earned on the justice seat in Edinb'ro'--money paid for rum and run silks . . ."

Of course I had heard of it; everybody had; but it had been some years before.

"We're backwards hereabouts," O'Brien jeered. "But over there they winked and chuckled at the judge, and they do the same in Havana at us."

Suddenly from behind us the voice of the young girl said, "Of what do you discourse, my English cousin?"

O'Brien interposed deferentially. "Señorita, I ask him to come to Rio," he said.

She turned her large dark eyes scrutinizingly upon me, then dropped them again. She was arranging some melon seeds in a rayed circle round the lizard that looked motionlessly at her.

"Do not speak very loudly, lest you awaken my father," she warned us.

The old Don's face was still turned to the ceiling. Carlos, standing behind his chair, opened his mouth a little in a half smile. I was really angry with O'Brien by that time, with his air of omniscience, superiority, and self-content, as if he were

talking to a child or someone very credulous and weak-minded.

"What right have you to speak for me, Señor Juez?" I said in the best Spanish I could.

The young girl looked at me once more, and then again looked down.

"Oh, I can speak for you," he answered in English, "because I know. Your position's this." He sat down in his rocking chair, crossed his legs, and looked at me as if he expected me to show signs of astonishment at his knowing so much. "You're in a hole. You must leave this island of Jamaica--surely it's as distressful as my own dear land--and you can't go home, because the runners would be after you. You're 'wanted' here as well as there, and you've nowhere to go."

I looked at him, quite startled by this view of my case. He extended one plump hand towards me, and still further lowered his voice.

"Now, I offer you a good berth, a snug berth. And 'tis a pretty spot." He got a sort of languorous honey into his voice, and drawled out, "The--the Señorita's." He took an air of businesslike candour. "You can help us, and we you; we could do without you better than you without us. Our undertaking--there's big names in it, just as in the Free Trading you know so well, don't be saying you don't--is worked from Havana. What we need is a man we can trust. We had one--Nichols. You remember the mate of the ship you came over in. He was Nicola el Demonio; he won't be any longer--I can't tell you why, it's too long a story."

I did remember very vividly that cadaverous Nova Scotian mate of the Thames, who had warned me with truculent menaces against showing my face in Rio Medio. I remembered his sallow, shiny cheeks, and the exaggerated gestures of his claw-like hands.

O'Brien smiled. "Nichols is alive right enough, but no more good than if he were dead. And that's the truth. He pretends his nerve's gone; he was a devil among tailors for a time, but he's taken to crying now. It was when your blundering old admiral's boats had to be beaten off that his zeal cooled. He thinks the British Government will rise in its strength." There was a bitter contempt in his voice, but he regained his calm business tone. "It will do nothing of the sort. I've given them those seven poor devils that had to die to-day without absolution. So Nichols is done for, as far as we are concerned. I've got him put away to keep him from blabbing. You can have his place--and better than his place. He was only a sailor, which you are not. However, you know enough of ships, and what we want is a man with courage, of course, but also a man we can trust. Any of the Creoles would bolt into the bush the moment they'd five dollars in hand. We'll pay you

well; a large share of all you take."

I laughed outright. "You're quite mistaken in your man," I said. "You are, really."

He shook his head gently, and brushed an invisible speck from his plump black knees.

"You must go somewhere," he said. "Why not go with us?"

I looked at him, puzzled by his tenacity and assurance.

"Ramon here has told us you battered the admiral last night; and there's a warrant out already against you for attempted murder. You're hand and glove with the best of the Separationists in this island, I know, but they won't save you from being committed--for rebellion, perhaps. You know it as well as I do. You were down here to take a passage to-day, weren't you, now?"

I remembered that the Island Loyalists said that the pirates and Separationists worked together to bother the admiral and raise discontent. Living in the centre of Separationist discontent with the Macdonalds, I knew it was not true. But nothing was too bad to say against the planters who clamoured for union with the United States.

O'Brien leaned forward. His voice had a note of disdain, and then took one of deeper earnestness; it sank into his chest. He extended his hand; his eyebrows twitched. He looked--he was--a conspirator.

"I tell you I do it for the sake of Ireland," he said passionately. "Every ship we take, every clamour they raise here, is a stroke and is disgrace for them over there that have murdered us and ruined my own dear land." His face worked convulsively; I was in the presence of one of the primeval passions. But he grew calm immediately after. "You want Separation for reasons of your own. I don't ask what they are. No doubt you and your crony Macdonald and the rest of them will feather your own nests; I don't ask. But help me to be a thorn in their sides--just a little--just a little longer. What do I put in your way? Just what you want. Have your Jamaica joined to the United States. You'll be able to come back with your pockets full, and I'll be joyful--for the sake of my own dear land."

I said suddenly and recklessly--if I had to face one race-passion, he had to look at another; we were cat and dog--Celt and Saxon, as it was in the beginning: "I am not a traitor to my country." Then I realized with sudden concern that I had probably awakened the old Don. He stirred uneasily in his chair, and lifted one hand.

"The moment I go out from here I'll denounce you," I said very low; "I swear I will. You're here; you can't get away; you'll swing."

O'Brien started. His eyes blazed at me. Then he frowned. "I've been misled," he muttered, with a dark glance at Carlos. And recovering his jocular serenity, "Ye mean it?" he asked; "it's not British heroics?"

The old Don stirred again and sighed. The young girl glided swiftly to his side. "Señor O'Brien," she said, "you have so irritated my English cousin that he has awakened my father."

O'Brien grinned gently. "'Tis ever the way," he said sardonically. "The English fools do the harm and the Irish fool gets the kicking." He rose to his feet, quite collected, a spick-and-span little man. "I suppose I've said too much. Well, well! You are going to denounce the senior judge of the Marine Court of Havana as a pirate. I wonder who will believe you!" He went behind the old Don's chair with the gliding motion of a Spanish lawyer, and slipped down the open trap-hatch near the window.

It was the disappearance of a shadow. I heard some guttural mutterings come up through the hatch, a rustling, then silence. If he was afraid of me at all he carried it off very well. I apologized to the young girl for having awakened her father. Her colour was very high, and her eyes sparkled. If she had not been so very beautiful I should have gone away at once. She said angrily:

"He is odious to me, the Señor Juez. Too long my father has suffered his insolence." She was very small, but she had an extraordinary dignity of command. "I could see, Señor, that he was annoying you. Why should you consider such a creature?" Her head drooped. "But my father is very old."

I turned upon Carlos, who stood all black in the light of the window.

"Why did you make me meet him? He may be a judge of your Marine Court, but he's nothing but a scoundrelly bog-trotter."

Carlos said a little haughtily, "You must not denounce him. You should not leave this place if I feared you would try thus to bring dishonour on this gray head, and involve this young girl in a public scandal." His manner became soft. "For the honour of the house you shall say nothing. And you shall come with us. I need you."

I was full of mistrust now. If he did countenance this unlawful enterprise, whose

headquarters were in Rio Medio, he was not the man for me. Though it was big enough to be made, by the papers at home, of political importance, it was, after all, neither more nor less than piracy. The idea of my turning a sort of Irish traitor was so extravagantly outrageous that now I could smile at the imbecility of that fellow O'Brien. As to turning into a sea-thief for lucre--my blood boiled.

No. There was something else there. Something deep; something dangerous; some intrigue, that I could not conceive even the first notion of. But that Carlos wanted anxiously to make use of me for some purpose was clear. I was mystified to the point of forgetting how heavily I was compromised even in Jamaica, though it was worth remembering, because at that time an indictment for rebellion--under the Black Act--was no joking matter. I might be sent home under arrest; and even then, there was my affair with the runners.

"It is coming to pay a visit," he was saying persuasively, "while your affair here blows over, my Juan--and--and--making my last hours easy, perhaps."

I looked at him; he was worn to a shadow--a shadow with dark wistful eyes. "I don't understand you," I faltered.

The old man stirred, opened his lids, and put a gold vinaigrette to his nostrils.

"Of course I shall not denounce O'Brien," I said. "I, too, respect the honour of your house."

"You are even better than I thought you. And if I entreat you, for the love of your mother--of your sister? Juan, it is not for myself, it is-----"

The young girl was pouring some drops from a green phial into a silver goblet; she passed close to us, and handed it to her father, who had leant a little forward in his chair. Every movement of hers affected me with an intimate joy; it was as if I had been waiting to see just that carriage of the neck, just that proud glance from the eyes, just that droop of eyelashes upon the cheeks, for years and years.

"No, I shall hold my tongue, and that's enough," I said.

At that moment the old Don sat up and cleared his throat. Carlos sprang towards him with an infinite grace of tender obsequiousness. He mentioned my name and the relationship, then rehearsed the innumerable titles of his uncle, ending "and patron of the Bishopric of Pinar del Rio."

I stood stiffly in front of the old man. He bowed his head at intervals, holding the silver cup carefully whilst his chair rocked a little. When Carlos' mellow voice had

finished the rehearsing of the sonorous styles, I mumbled something about "transcendent honour."

He stopped me with a little, deferentially peremptory gesture of one hand, and began to speak, smiling with a contraction of the lips and a trembling of the head. His voice was very low, and quavered slightly, but every syllable was enunciated with the same beauty of clearness that there was in his features, in his hands, in his ancient gestures.

"The honour is to me," he said, "and the pleasure. I behold my kinsman, who, with great heroism, I am told, rescued my dearly loved nephew from great dangers; it is an honour to me to be able to give him thanks. My beloved and lamented sister contracted a union with an English hidalgo, through whose house your own very honourable family is allied to my own; it is a pleasure to me to meet after many years with one who has seen the places where her later life was passed."

He paused, and breathed with some difficulty, as if the speech had exhausted him. Afterwards he began to ask me questions about Rooksby's aunt--the lamented sister of his speech. He had loved her greatly, he said. I knew next to nothing about her, and his fine smile and courtly, aged, deferential manners made me very nervous. I felt as if I had been taken to pay a ceremonial visit to a supreme pontiff in his dotage. He spoke about Horton Priory with some animation for a little while, and then faltered, and forgot what he was speaking of. Suddenly he said:

"But where is O'Brien? Did he write to the Governor here? I should like you to know the Señor O'Brien. He is a spiritual man."

I forbore to say that I had already seen O'Brien, and the old man sank into complete silence. It was beginning to grow dark, and the noise of suppressed voices came from the open trap-door. Nobody said anything.

I felt a sort of uneasiness; I could by no means understand the connection between the old Don and what had gone before, and I did not, in a purely conventional sense, know how long I ought to stop. The sky through the barred windows had grown pallid.

The old Don said suddenly, "You must visit my poor town of Rio Medio," but he gave no specific invitation and said nothing more.

Afterwards he asked, rather querulously, "But where is O'Brien? He must write those letters for me."

The young girl said, "He has preceded us to the ship; he will write there."

She had gone back to her seat. Don Balthasar shrugged his shoulders to his ears, and moved his hands from his knees.

"Without doubt, he knows best," he said, "but he should ask me."

It grew darker still; the old Don seemed to have fallen asleep again. Save for the gleam of the silver buckle of his hat, he had disappeared into the gloom of the place. I remembered my engagement to dine with Williams on board the Lion, and I rose to my feet. There did not seem to be any chance of my talking to the young girl. She was once more leaning nonchalantly over the lizard, and her hair drooped right across her face like clusters of grapes. There was a gleam on a little piece of white forehead, and all around and about her there were shadows deepening. Carlos came concernedly towards me as I looked at the door.

"But you must not go yet," he said a little suavely; "I have many things to say. Tell me----"

His manner heightened my uneasiness to a fear. The expression of his eyes changed, and they became fixed over my shoulder, while on his lips the words "You must come, you must come," trembled, hardly audible. I could only shake my head. At once he stepped back as if resigning. He was giving me up--and it occurred to me that if the danger of his seduction was over, there remained the danger of arrest just outside the door.

Some one behind me said peremptorily, "It is time," and there was a flickering diminution of the light. I had a faint instantaneous view of the old Don dozing, with his head back--of the tall windows, cut up into squares by the black bars. Something hairily coarse ran harshly down my face; I grew blind; my mouth, my eyes, my nostrils were filled with dust; my breath shut in upon me became a flood of warm air. I had no time to resist. I kicked my legs convulsively; my elbows were drawn tight against my sides. Someone grunted under my weight; then I was carried--down, along, up, down again; my feet were knocking along a wall, and the top of my head rubbed occasionally against what must have been the roof of a low stone passage, issuing from under the back room of Ramon's store. Finally, I was dropped upon something that felt like a heap of wood-shavings. My surprise, rage, and horror had been so great that, after the first stifled cry, I had made no sound. I heard the footsteps of several men going away.