

## CHAPTER FOUR

I remained lying there, bound hand and foot, for a long time; for quite long enough to allow me to collect my senses and see that I had been a fool to threaten O'Brien. I had been nobly indignant, and behold! I had a sack thrown over my head for my pains, and was put away safely somewhere or other. It seemed to be a cellar.

I was in search of romance, and here were all the elements; Spaniards, a conspirator, and a kidnapping; but I couldn't feel a fool and romantic as well. True romance, I suppose, needs a whirl of emotions to extinguish all the senses except that of sight, which it dims. Except for sight, which I hadn't at all, I had the use of them all, and all reported unpleasant things.

I ached and smarted with my head in a sack, with my mouth full of flour that had gone mouldy and offended my nostrils; I had a sense of ignominy, and I was extremely angry; I could see that the old Don was in his dotage--but Carlos I was bitter against.

I was not really afraid; I could not suppose that the Riegos would allow me to be murdered or seriously maltreated. But I was incensed against Fate or Chance or whatever it is--on account of the ignominious details, the coarse sack, the mouldy flour, the stones of the tunnel that had barked my shins, the tightness of the ropes that bound my ankles together, and seemed to cut into my wrists behind my back.

I waited, and my fury grew in a dead silence. How would it end--with what outrage? I would show my contempt and preserve my dignity by submitting without a struggle--I despised this odious plot. At last there were voices, footsteps; I found it very hard to carry out my resolution and refrain from stifled cries and kicks. I was lifted up and carried, like a corpse, with many stumbles, by men who sometimes growled as they hastened along. From time to time somebody murmured, "Take care." Then I was deposited into a boat. The world seemed to be swaying, splashing, jarring--and it became obvious to me that I was being taken to some ship. The Spanish ship, of course. Suddenly I broke into cold perspiration at the thought that, after all, their purpose might be to drop me quickly overboard. "Carlos!" I cried. I felt the point of a knife on my breast. "Silence, Señor!" said a gruff voice.

This fear vanished when we came alongside a ship evidently already under way; but I was handled so roughly and clumsily that I was thoroughly exhausted and

out of breath, by the time I was got on board. All was still around me; I was left alone on a settee in the main cabin, as I imagined. For a long time I made no movement; then a door opened and shut. There was a murmured conversation between two voices. This went on in animated whispers for a time. At last I felt as if someone were trying, rather ineffectually, to remove the sack itself. Finally, that actually did rub its way over my head, and something soft and silken began to wipe my eyes with a surprising care, and even tenderness. "This was stupidly done," came a discontented remark; "you do not handle a caballero like this."

"And how else was it to be done, to that kind of caballero?" was the curt retort.

By that time I had blinked my eyes into a condition for remaining open for minute stretches. Two men were bending over me--Carlos and O'Brien himself. The latter said:

"Believe me, your mistake made this necessary. This young gentleman was about to become singularly inconvenient, and he is in no way harmed."

He spoke in a velvety voice, and walked away gently through the darkness. Carlos followed with the lanthorn dangling at arm's length; strangely enough he had not even looked at me. I suppose he was ashamed, and I was too proud to speak to him, with my hands and feet tied fast. The door closed, and I remained sitting in the darkness. Long small windows grew into light at one end of the place, curved into an outline that suggested a deep recess. The figure of a crowned woman, that moved rigidly up and down, was silhouetted over my body. Groaning creaks of wood and the faint swish of water made themselves heard continuously.

I turned my head to a click, I saw a door open a little way, and the small blue flame of a taper floated into the room. Then the door closed with a definite sound of shutting in. The light shone redly through protecting fingers, and upwards on to a small face. It came to a halt, and I made out the figure of a girl leaning across a table and looking upwards. There was a click of glass, and then a great blaze of light created a host of shining things; a glitter of gilded carvings, red velvet couches, a shining table, a low ceiling, painted white, on carved rafters. A large silver lamp she had lighted kept on swinging to the gentle motion of the ship.

She stood just in front of me; the girl that I had seen through the door; the girl I had seen play with the melon seeds. She was breathing fast--it agitated me to be alone with her--and she had a little shining dagger in her hand.

She cut the rope round my ankles, and motioned me imperiously to turn round. "Your hands--your hands!"

I turned my back awkwardly to her, and felt the grip of small, cool, very firm fingers upon my wrists. My arms fell apart, numb and perfectly useless; I was half aware of pain in them, but it passed unnoticed among a cloud of other emotions. I didn't feel my finger-tips because I had the agitation, the flutter, the tantalization of looking at her.

I was all the while conscious of the--say, the irregularity of my position, but I felt very little fear. There were the old Don, an ineffectual, silver-haired old gentleman, who obviously was not a pirate; the sleek O'Brien, and Carlos, who seemed to cough on the edge of a grave--and this young girl. There was not any future that I could conceive, and the past seemed to be cut off from me by a narrow, very dark tunnel through which I could see nothing at all.

The young girl was, for the moment, what counted most on the whole, the only thing the eye could rest on. She affected me as an apparition familiar, yet absolutely new in her charm. I had seen her gray eyes; I had seen her red lips; her dark hair, her lithe gestures; the carriage of her head; her throat, her hands. I knew her; I seemed to have known her for years. A rush of strange, sweet feeling made me dumb. She was looking at me, her lips set, her eyes wide and still; and suddenly she said:

"Ask nothing. The land is not far yet. You can escape, Carlos thought.... But no! You would only perish for nothing. Go with God." She pointed imperiously towards the square stern-ports of the cabin.

Following the direction of her hand, my eyes fell upon the image of a Madonna; rather large--perhaps a third life-size; with a gilt crown, a pink serious face bent a little forward over a pink naked child that perched on her left arm and raised one hand. It stood on a bracket, against the rudder casing, with fat cherubs' heads carved on the supports. The young girl crossed herself with a swift motion of the hand. The stern-ports, glazed in small panes, were black, and gleaming in a white frame-work.

"Go--go--go with God," the girl whispered urgently. "There is a boat-----"

I made a motion to rise; I wanted to go. The idea of having my liberty, of its being again a possibility, made her seem of less importance; other things began to have their share. But I could not stand, though the blood was returning, warm and tingling, in my legs and hands. She looked at me with a sharp frown puckering her brows a little; beat a hasty tattoo with one of her feet, and cast a startled glance towards the forward door that led on deck. Then she walked to the other side of the table, and sat looking at me in the glow of the lamp.

"Your life hangs on a thread," she murmured.

I answered, "You have given it to me. Shall I never-----?" I was acutely conscious of the imperfection of my language.

She looked at me sharply; then lowered her lids. Afterwards she raised them again. "Think of yourself. Every moment is-----"

"I will be as quick as I can," I said.

I was chafing my ankles and looking up at her. I wanted, very badly, to thank her for taking an interest in me, only I found it very difficult to speak to her. Suddenly she sprang to her feet:

"That man thinks he can destroy you. I hate him--I detest him! You have seen how he treats my father."

It struck me, like a blow, that she was merely avenging O'Brien's insolence to her father. I had been kidnapped against Don Balthasar Riego's will. It gave me very well the measure of the old man's powerlessness in face of his intendant--who was obviously confident of afterwards soothing the resentment.

I was glad I had not thanked her for taking an interest in me. I was distressed, too, because once more I had missed Romance by an inch.

Someone kicked at the locked door. A voice cried--I could not help thinking--warningly, "Seraphina, Seraphina," and another voice said with excessive softness, "Senorita! Voyons! quelle folie."

She sprang at me. Her hand hurt my wrist as she dragged me aft. I scrambled clumsily into the recess of the counter, and put my head out. The night air was very chilly and full of brine; a little boat towing by a long painter was sheering about in the phosphorescent wake of the ship. The sea itself was pallid in the light of the moon, invisible to me. A little astern of us, on our port quarter, a vessel under a press of canvas seemed to stand still; looming up like an immense pale ghost. She might have been coming up with us, or else we had just passed her--I couldn't tell. I had no time to find out, and I didn't care. The great thing was to get hold of the painter. The whispers of the girl urged me, but the thing was not easy; the rope, fastened higher up, streamed away out of reach of my hand. At last, by watching the moment when it slacked, and throwing myself half out of the stern window, I managed to hook it with my finger-tips. Next moment it was nearly jerked away from me, but I didn't lose it, and the boat taking a run just then under the counter, I got a good hold. The sound of another kick at the

door made me swing myself out, head first, without reflection. I got soused to the waist before I had reached the bows of the boat. With a frantic effort I clambered up and rolled in. When I got on my legs, the jerky motion of tossing had ceased, the boat was floating still, and the light of the stern windows was far away already. The girl had managed to cut the painter.

The other vessel was heading straight for me, rather high on the water, broad-beamed, squat, and making her way quietly, like a shadow. The land might have been four or five miles away--I had no means of knowing exactly. It looked like a high black cloud, and purple-gray mists here and there among the peaks hung like scarves.

I got an oar over the stern to scull, but I was not fit for much exertion. I stared at the ship I had left. Her stern windows glimmered with a slight up-and-down motion; her sails seemed to fall into black confusion against the blaze of the moon; faint cries came to me out of her, and by the alteration of her shape I understood that she was being brought to, preparatory to lowering a boat. She might have been half a mile distant when the gleam of her stern windows swung slowly round and went out. I had no mind to be recaptured, and began to scull frantically towards the other vessel. By that time she was quite near--near enough for me to hear the lazy sound of the water at her bows, and the occasional flutter of a sail. The land breeze was dying away, and in the wake of the moon I perceived the boat of my pursuers coming over, black and distinct; but the other vessel was nearly upon me. I sheered under her starboard bow and yelled, "Ship ahoy! Ship ahoy!"

There was a lot of noise on board, and no one seemed to hear my shouts. Several voices yelled. "That cursed Spanish ship ahead is heaving-to athwart our hawse." The crew and the officers seemed all to be forward shouting abuse at the "lubberly Dago," and it looked as though I were abandoned to my fate. The ship forged ahead in the light air; I failed in my grab at her fore chains, and my boat slipped astern, bumping against the side. I missed the main chain, too, and yelled all the time with desperation, "For God's sake! Ship ahoy! For God's sake throw me a rope, some-, body, before it's too late!"

I was giving up all hope when a heavy coil--of a brace, I suppose--fell upon my head, nearly knocking me over. Half stunned as I was, desperation lent me strength to scramble up her side hand over hand, while the boat floated away from under my feet. I was done up when I got on the poop. A yell came from forward, "Hard aport." Then the same voice addressed itself to abusing the Spanish ship very close to us now. "What do you mean by coming-to right across my bows like this?" it yelled in a fury.

I stood still in the shadows on the poop. We were drawing slowly past the stern of the Spaniard, and O'Brien's voice answered in English:

"We are picking up a boat of ours that's gone adrift with a man. Have you seen anything of her?" "No--confound you and your boat." Of course those forward knew nothing of my being on board. The man who had thrown me the rope--a passenger, a certain Major Cowper, going home with his wife and child--had walked away proudly, without deigning as much as to look at me twice, as if to see a man clamber on board a ship ten miles from the land was the most usual occurrence. He was, I found afterwards, an absurd, pompous person, as stiff as a ramrod, and so full of his own importance that he imagined he had almost demeaned himself by his condescension in throwing down the rope in answer to my despairing cries. On the other hand, the helmsman, the only other person aft, was so astounded as to become quite speechless. I could see, in the light of the binnacle thrown upon his face, his staring eyes and his open mouth.

The voice forward had subsided by then, and as the stern of the Spanish ship came abreast of the poop, I stepped out of the shadow of the sails, and going close to the rail I said, not very loud--there was no need to shout--but very distinctly:

"I am out of your clutches, Mr. O'Brien, after all. I promise you that you shall hear of me yet."

Meanwhile, another man had come up from forward on the poop, growling like a bear, a short, rotund little man, the captain of the ship. The Spanish vessel was dropping astern, silent, with her sails all black, hiding the low moon. Suddenly a hurried hail came out of her.

"What ship is this?"

"What's that to you, blank your eyes? The Breeze, if you want to know. What are you going to do about it?" the little skipper shouted fiercely. In the light wind the ships were separating slowly.

"Where are you bound to?" hailed O'Brien's voice again.

The little skipper laughed with exasperation. "Dash your blanked impudence. To Havana, and be hanged to you. Anything more you want to know? And my name's Lumsden, and I am sixty years old, and if I had you here, I would put a head on you for getting in my way, you-----"

He stopped, out of breath. Then, addressing himself to his passenger:

"That's the Spanish chartered ship that brought these sanguinary pirates that were hanged this morning, major. She's taking the Spanish commissioner back. I suppose they had no man-of-war handy for the service in Cuba. Did you ever-----"

He had caught sight of me for the first time, and positively jumped a foot high with astonishment.

"Who on earth's that there?"

His astonishment was comprehensible. The major, Without deigning to enlighten him, walked proudly away. He was too dignified a person to explain.

It was left to me. Frequenting, as I had been doing, Ramon's store, which was a great gossiping centre of the maritime world in Kingston, I knew the faces and the names of most of the merchant captains who used to gather there to drink and swap yarns. I was not myself quite unknown to little Lumsden. I told him all my story, and all the time he kept on scratching his bald head, full of incredulous perplexity. Old Señor Ramon! Such a respectable man. And I had been kidnapped? From his store!

"If I didn't see you here in my cuddy before my eyes, I wouldn't believe a word you say," he declared absurdly.

But he was ready enough to take me to Havana. However, he insisted upon calling down his mate, a gingery fellow, short, too, but wizened, and as stupid as himself.

"Here's that Kemp, you know. The young fellow that Macdonald of the Horton Pen picked up somewhere two years ago. The Spaniards in that ship kidnapped him--so he says. He says they are pirates. But that's a government chartered ship, and all the pirates that have ever been in her were hanged this morning in Kingston. But here he is, anyhow. And he says that at home he had throttled a Bow Street runner before he went off with the smugglers. Did you ever hear the likes of it, Mercer? I shouldn't think he was telling us a parcel of lies; hey, Mercer?"

And the two grotesque little chaps stood nodding their heads at me sagaciously.

"He's a desperate character, then," said Mercer at last, cautiously. "This morning, the very last thing I heard ashore, as I went to fetch the fresh beef off, is that he had been assaulting a justice of the peace on the highroad, and had been trying to knock down the admiral, who was coming down to town in a chaise with Mr.

Topnambo. There's a warrant out against him under the Black Act, sir."

Then he brightened up considerably. "So he must have been kidnapped or something after all, sir, or he would be in chokey now."

It was true, after all. Romance reserved me for another fate, for another sort of captivity, for more than one sort. And my imagination had been captured, enslaved already by the image of that young girl who had called me her English cousin, the girl with the lizard, the girl with the dagger! And with every word she uttered romance itself, if I had only known it, the romance of persecuted lovers, spoke to me through her lips.

That night the Spanish ship had the advantage of us in a freshening wind, and overtook the Breeze. Before morning dawned she passed us, and before the close of the next day she was gone out of sight ahead, steering, apparently, the same course with ourselves.

Her superior sailing had an enormous influence upon my fortunes; and I was more adrift in the world than ever before, more in the dark as to what awaited me than when I was lugged along with my head in a sack. I gave her but little thought. A sort of numbness had come over me. I could think of the girl who had cut me free, and for all my resentment at the indignity of my treatment, I had hardly a thought to spare for the man who had me bound. I was pleased to remember that she hated him; that she had said so herself. For the rest, I had a vague notion of going to the English Consul in Havana. After all, I was not a complete nobody. I was John Kemp, a gentleman, well connected; I could prove it. The Bow Street runner had not been dead as I had thought. The last letter from Veronica informed me that the man had given up thief-catching, and was keeping, now, a little inn in the neighbourhood. Ralph, my brother-in-law, had helped him to it, no doubt. I could come home safely now.

And I had discovered I was no longer anxious to return home.