

## CHAPTER FIVE

There wasn't any weirdness about the ship when I woke in the sunlight. She was old and slow and rather small. She carried Lumsden (master), Mercer (mate), a crew that seemed no better and no worse than any other crew, and the old gentleman who had thrown me the rope the night before, and who seemed to think that he had derogated from his dignity in doing it. He was a Major Cowper, retiring from a West Indian regiment, and had with him his wife and a disagreeable little girl, with a yellow pigtail and a bony little chest and arms.

On the whole, they weren't the sort of people that one would have chosen for companions on a pleasure-trip. Major Cowper's wife lay all day in a deck chair, alternately drawing to her and repulsing the whining little girl. The major talked to me about the scandals with which the world was filled, and kept a suspicious eye upon his wife. He spent the morning in shaving what part of his face his white whiskers did not cover, the afternoon in enumerating to me the subjects on which he intended to write to the Horse Guards. He had grown entirely amiable, perhaps for the reason that his wife ignored my existence.

Meantime I let the days slip by idly, only wondering how I could manage to remain in Havana and breathe the air of the same island with the girl who had delivered me. Perhaps some day we might meet--who knows? I was not afraid of that Irishman.

It never occurred to me to bother about the course we were taking, till one day we sighted the Cuban coast, and I heard Lumsden and Mercer pronounce the name of Rio Medio. The two ridiculous old chaps talked of Mexican privateers, which seemed to rendezvous off that place. They pointed out to me the headland near the bay. There was no sign of privateer or pirate, as far as the eye could reach. In the course of beating up to windward we closed in with the coast, and then the wind fell.

I remained motionless against the rail for half the night, looking at the land. Not a single light was visible. A wistful, dreamy longing, a quiet longing pervaded me, as though I had been drugged. I dreamed, as young men dream, of a girl's face. She was sleeping there within this dim vision of land. Perhaps this was as near as I should ever be able to approach her. I felt a sorrow without much suffering. A great stillness reigned around the ship, over the whole earth. At last I went below and fell asleep.

I was awakened by the idea that I had heard an extraordinary row--shouting and

stamping. But there was a dead silence, to which I was listening with all my ears. Suddenly there was a little pop, as if someone had spat rather vigorously; then a succession of shouts, then another little pop, and more shouts, and the stamping overhead. A woman began to shriek on the other side of the bulkhead, then another woman somewhere else, then the little girl. I hurried on deck, but it was some minutes before I could make things fit together. I saw Major Cowper on the poop; he was brandishing a little pistol and apostrophizing Lumsden, who was waving ineffectual arms towards the sky; and there was a great deal of shouting, forward and overhead. Cowper rushed at me, and explained that something was an abominable scandal, and that there were women on board. He waved his pistol towards the side; I noticed that the butt was inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Lumsden rushed at him and clawed at his clothes, imploring him not to be rash.

We were so close in with the coast that the surf along the shore gleamed and sparkled in full view.

Someone shouted aloft, "Look out! They are firing again."

Then only I noticed, a quarter of a mile astern and between the land and us, a little schooner, rather low in the water, curtseying under a cloud of white canvas—a wonderful thing to look at. It was as if I had never seen anything so instinct with life and the joy of it. A snowy streak spattered away from her bows at each plunge. She came at a great speed, and a row of faces looking our way became plain, like a beady decoration above her bulwarks. She swerved a little out of her course, and a sort of mushroom of smoke grew out of her side; there was a little gleam of smouldering light hidden in its heart. The spitting bang followed again, and something skipped along the wave-tops beside us, raising little pillars of spray that drifted away on the wind. The schooner came back on her course, heading straight for us; a shout like groaned applause went up from on board us. Lumsden hid his face in his hands.

I could hear little Mercer shrieking out orders forwards. We were shortening sail. The schooner, luffing a little, ranged abreast. A hail like a metal blare came out of her.

"If you donn'd heef-to we seenk you! We seenk you! By God!"

Major Cowper was using abominable language beside me. Suddenly he began to call out to someone:

"Go down... go down, I say."

A woman's face disappeared into the hood of the companion like a rabbit's tail

into its burrow. There was a great volley of cracks from the loose sails, and the ship came to. At the same time the schooner, now on our beam and stripped of her light kites, put in stays and remained on the other tack, with her foresheet to windward.

Major Cowper said it was a scandal. The country was going to the dogs because merchantmen were not compelled by law to carry guns. He spluttered into my ears that there wasn't so much as a twopenny signal mortar on board, and no more powder than enough to load one of his duelling pistols. He was going to write to the Horse Guards.

A blue-and-white ensign fluttered up to the main gaff of the schooner; a boat dropped into the water. It all went breathlessly--I hadn't time to think. I saw old Cowper run to the side and aim his pistol overboard; there was an ineffectual click; he made a gesture of disgust, and tossed it on deck. His head hung dejectedly down upon his chest.

Lumsden said, "Thank God, oh, thank God!" and the old man turned on him like a snarling dog.

"You infernal coward," he said. "Haven't you got a spark of courage?"

A moment after, our decks were invaded by men, brown and ragged, leaping down from the bulwarks one after the other.

They had come out at break of day (we must have been observed the evening before), a big schooner--full of as ill-favoured, ragged rascals as the most vivid imagination could conceive. Of course, there had been no resistance on our part. We were outsailed, and at the first ferocious hail the halyards had been let go by the run, and all our crew had bolted aloft. A few bronzed bandits posted abreast of each mast kept them there by the menace of bell-mouthed blunderbusses pointed upwards. Lumsden and Mercer had been each tied flat down to a spare spar. They presented an appearance too ridiculous to awaken genuine compassion. Major Cowper was made to sit on a hen-coop, and a bearded pirate, with a red handkerchief tied round his head and a cutlass in his hand, stood guard over him. The major looked angry and crestfallen. The rest of that infamous crew, without losing a moment, rushed into the cuddy to loot the cabins for wearing apparel, jewellery, and money. They squabbled amongst themselves, throwing the things on deck into a great heap of booty.

The schooner flying the Mexican flag remained hove to abeam. But in the man in command of the boarding party I recognized Tomas Castro!

He was a pirate. My surmises were correct. He looked the part to the life, in a plumed hat, cloaked to the chin, and standing apart in a saturnine dignity.

"Are you going to have us all murdered, Castro?" I asked, with indignation. To my surprise he did not seem to recognize me; indeed, he pretended not to see me at all. I might have been thin air for any sign he gave of being aware of my presence; but, turning his back on me, he addressed himself to the ignobly captive Lumsden, telling him that he, Castro, was the commander of that Mexican schooner, and menacing him with dreadful threats of vengeance for what he called the resistance we had offered to a privateer of the Republic. I suppose he was pleased to qualify with the name of armed resistance the miserable little pop of the major's pocket pistol. To punish that audacity he announced that no private property would be respected.

"You shall have to give up all the money on board," he yelled at the wretched man lying there like a sheep ready for slaughter. The other could only gasp and blink. Castro's ferocity was so remarkable that for a moment it struck me as put on. There was no necessity for it. We were meek and silent enough, only poor Major Cowper muttered:

"My wife and child. . . ."

The ragged brown men were pouring on deck from below; their arms full of bundles. Half a dozen of them started to pull off the main hatch tarpaulin. Up aloft the crew looked down with scared eyes. I began to say excitedly, in my indignation, almost into his very ear:

"I know you, Tomas Castro--I know you--Tomas Castro."

Even then he seemed not to hear; but at last he looked into my face balefully, as if he wished to convey the plague to me.

"Hold your tongue," he said very quickly in Spanish. "This is folly!" His little hawk's beak of a nose nestled in his moustache. He waved his arm and declared forcibly, "I don't know you. I am Nicola el Demonio, the Mexican."

Poor old Cowper groaned. The reputation of Nicola el Demonio, if rumours were to be trusted, was a horrible thing for a man with women depending on him.

Five or six of these bandits were standing about Lumsden, the major, and myself, fingering the locks of their guns. Poor old Cowper, breaking away from his guard, was raging up and down the poop; and the big pirate kept him off the companion truculently. The major wanted to get below; the little girl was screaming in the

cuddy, and we could hear her very plainly. It was rather horrible. Castro had gone forward into the crowd of scoundrels round the hatchway. It was only then that I realized that Major Cowper was in a state of delirious apprehension and fury; I seemed to remember at last that for a long time he had been groaning somewhere near me. He kept on saying:

"Oh, for God's sake--for God's sake--my poor wife."

I understood that he must have been asking me to do something.

It came as a shock to me. I had a vague sensation of his fears. Up till then I hadn't realized that any one could be much interested in Mrs. Cowper.

He caught hold of my arm, as if he wanted support, and stuttered:

"Couldn't you--couldn't you speak to-----" He nodded in the direction of Tomas Castro, who was bent and shouting down the hatch. "Try to-----" the old man gasped. "Didn't you hear the child scream?" His face was pallid and wrinkled, like a piece of crumpled paper; his mouth was drawn on one side, and his lips quivered one against the other.

I went to Castro and caught him by the arm. He spun round and smiled discreetly.

"We shall be using force upon you directly. Pray resist, Señor; but not too much. What? His wife? Tell that stupid Inglez with whispers that she is safe." He whispered with an air of profound intelligence, "We shall be ready to go as soon as these foul swine have finished their stealing. I cannot stop them," he added.

I could not pause to think what he might mean. The child's shrieks resounding louder and louder, I ran below. There were a couple of men in the cabin with the women. Mrs. Cowper was lying back upon a sofa, her face very white and drawn, her eyes wide open. Her useless hands twitched at her dress; otherwise she was absolutely motionless, like a frozen woman. The black nurse was panting convulsively in a corner--a palpitating bundle of orange and purple and white clothes. The child was rushing round and round, shrieking. The two men did nothing at all. One of them kept saying in Spanish:

"But--we only want your rings. But--we only want your rings."

The other made feeble efforts to catch the child as it rushed past him. He wanted its earrings--they were contraband of war, I suppose.

Mrs. Cowper was petrified with terror. Explaining the desires of the two men was like shouting things into the ear of a very deaf woman. She kept on saying:

"Will they go away then? Will they go away then?" All the while she was drawing the rings off her thin fingers, and handing them to me. I gave them to the ruffians whose presence seemed to terrify her out of her senses. I had no option. I could do nothing else. Then I asked her whether she wished me to remain with her and the child. She said:

"Yes. No. Go away. Yes. No--let me think."

Finally it came into my head that in the captain's cabin she would be able to talk to her husband through the deck ventilator, and, after a time, the idea filtered through to her brain. She could hardly walk at all. The child and the nurse ran in front of us, and, practically, I carried her there in my arms. Once in the stateroom she struggled loose from me, and, rushing in, slammed the door violently in my face. She seemed to hate me.