

## CHAPTER SIX

I went on deck again. On the poop about twenty men had surrounded Major Cowper; his white head was being jerked backwards and forwards above their bending backs; they had got his old uniform coat off, and were fighting for the buttons. I had just time to shout to him, "Your wife's down there, she's all right!" when very suddenly I became aware that Tomas Castro was swearing horribly at these thieves. He drove them away, and we were left quite alone on the poop, I holding the major's coat over my arm. Major Cowper stooped down to call through the skylight. I could hear faint answers coming up to him.

Meantime, some of the rascals left on board the schooner had filled on her in a light wind, and, sailing round our stern, had brought their vessel alongside. Ropes were thrown on board and we lay close together, but the schooner with her dirty decks looked to me, now, very sinister and very sordid.

Then I remembered Castro's extraordinary words; they suggested infinite possibilities of a disastrous nature, I could not tell just what. The explanation seemed to be struggling to bring itself to light, like a name that one has had for hours on the tip of a tongue without being able to formulate it. Major Cowper rose stiffly, and limped to my side. He looked at me askance, then shifted his eyes away. Afterwards, he took his coat from my arm. I tried to help him, but he refused my aid, and jerked himself painfully into it. It was too tight for him. Suddenly, he said:

"You seem to be deuced intimate with that man--deuced intimate."

His tone caused me more misgiving than I should have thought possible. He took a turn on the deserted deck; went to the skylight; called down, "All well, still?" waited, listening with his head on one side, and then came back to me.

"You drop into the ship," he said, "out of the clouds. Out of the clouds, I say. You tell us some sort of cock-and-bull story. I say it looks deuced suspicious." He took another turn and came back. "My wife says that you took her rings and--and--gave them to-----"

He had an ashamed air. It came into my head that that hateful woman had been egging him on to this through the skylight, instead of saying her prayers.

"Your wife!" I said. "Why, she might have been murdered--if I hadn't made her give them up. I believe I saved her life."

He said suddenly, "Tut, tut!" and shrugged his shoulders. He hung his head for a minute, then he added, "Mind, I don't say--I don't say that it mayn't be as you say. You're a very nice young fellow.... But what I say is--I am a public man--you ought to clear yourself." He was beginning to recover his military bearing.

"Oh! don't be absurd," I said.

One of the Spaniards came up to me and whispered, "You must come now. We are going to cast off." At the same time Tomas Castro prowled to the other side of the ship, within five yards of us. I called out, "Tomas Castro! Tomas Castro! I will not go with you." The man beside me said, "Come, señor! Vamos!"

Suddenly Castro, stretching his arm out at me, cried, "Come, hombres. This is the caballero; seize him." And to me in his broken English he shouted, "You may resist, if you like."

This was what I meant to do with all my might. The ragged crowd surrounded me; they chattered like monkeys. One man irritated me beyond conception. He looked like an inn-keeper in knee-breeches, had a broken nose that pointed to the left, and a double chin. More of them came running up every minute. I made a sort of blind rush at the fellow with the broken nose; my elbow caught him on the soft folds of flesh and he skipped backwards; the rest scattered in all directions, and then stood at a distance, chattering and waving their hands. And beyond them I saw old Cowper gesticulating approval. The man with the double chin drew a knife from his sleeve, crouched instantly, and sprang at me. I hadn't fought anybody since I had been at school; raising my fists was like trying a dubious experiment in an emergency. I caught him rather hard on the end of his broken nose; I felt the contact on my right, and a small pain in my left hand. His arms went up to the sky; his face, too. But I had started forward to meet him, and half a dozen of them flung their arms round me from behind.

I seemed to have an exaggerated clearness of vision; I saw each brown dirty paw reach out to clutch some part of me. I was not angry any more; it wasn't any good being angry, but I made a fight for it. There were dozens of them; they clutched my wrists, my elbows, and in between my wrists and my elbows, and my shoulders. One pair of arms was round my neck, another round my waist, and they kept on trying to catch my legs with ropes. We seemed to stagger all over the deck; I expect they got in each other's way; they would have made a better job of it if they hadn't been such a multitude. I must then have got a crack on the head, for everything grew dark; the night seemed to fall on us, as we fought.

Afterwards I found myself lying gasping on my back on the deck of the schooner;

four or five men were holding me down. Castro was putting a pistol into his belt. He stamped his foot violently, and then went and shouted in Spanish:

"Come you all on board. You have done mischief enough, fools of Lugarenos. Now we go."

I saw, as in a dream of stress and violence, some men making ready to cast off the schooner, and then, in a supreme effort, an effort of lusty youth and strength, which I remember to this day, I scattered men like chaff, and stood free.

For the fraction of a second I stood, ready to fall myself, and looking at prostrate men. It was a flash of vision, and then I made a bolt for the rail. I clambered furiously; I saw the deck of the old barque; I had just one exulting sight of it, and then Major Cowper uprose before my eyes and knocked me back on board the schooner, tumbling after me himself.

Twenty men flung themselves upon my body. I made no movement. The end had come. I hadn't the strength to shake off a fly, my heart was bursting my ribs. I lay on my back and managed to say, "Give me air." I thought I should die.

Castro, draped in his cloak, stood over me, but Major Cowper fell on his knees near my head, almost sobbing: "My papers! My papers! I tell you I shall starve. Make them give me back my papers. They ain't any use to them--my pension--mortgages--not worth a penny piece to you."

He crouched over my face, and the Spaniards stood around, wondering. He begged me to intercede, to save him those papers of the greatest importance.

Castro preserved his attitude of a conspirator. I was touched by the major's distress, and at last I condescended to address Castro on his behalf, though it cost me an effort, for I was angry, indignant, and humiliated.

"Whart--whart? What do I know of his papers? Let him find them." He waved his hand loftily.

The deck was hillocked with heaps of clothing, of bedding, casks of rum, old hats, and tarpaulins. Cowper ran in and out among the plunder, like a pointer in a turnip field. He was groaning.

Beside one of the pumps was a small pile of shiny cases; ship's instruments, a chronometer in its case, a medicine chest.

Cowper tottered at a black dispatch-box. "There, there!" he said; "I tell you I shall

starve if I don't have it. Ask him--ask him-----" He was clutching me like a drowning man.

Castro raised the inevitable arm towards heaven, letting his round black cloak fall into folds like those of an umbrella. Cowper gathered that he might take his japanned dispatch-box; he seized the brass handles and rushed towards the side, but at the last moment he had the good impulse to return to me, holding out his hand, and spluttering distractedly, "God bless you, God bless you." After a time he remembered that I had rescued his wife and child, and he asked God to bless me for that too. "If it is ever necessary," he said, "on my honour, if you escape, I will come a thousand miles to testify. On my honour--remember." He said he was going to live in Clapham. That is as much as I remember. I was held pinned down to the deck, and he disappeared from my sight. Before the ships had separated, I was carried below in the cabin of the schooner.

They left me alone there, and I sat with my head on my arms for a long time, I did not think of anything at all; I was too utterly done up with my struggles, and there was nothing to be thought about. I had grown to accept the meanness of things as if I had aged a great deal. I had seen men scratch each other's faces over coat buttons, old shoes--over Mercer's trousers. My own future did not interest me at this stage. I sat up and looked round me.

I was in a small, bare cabin, roughly wainscotted and exceedingly filthy. There were the grease-marks from the backs of heads all along a bulkhead above a wooden bench; the rough table, on which my arms rested, was covered with layers of tallow spots. Bright light shone through a porthole. Two or three ill-assorted muskets slanted about round the foot of the mast--a long old piece, of the time of Pizarro, all red velvet and silver' chasing, on a swivelled stand, three English fowling-pieces, and a coachman's blunderbuss. A man was rising from a mattress stretched on the floor; he placed a mandolin, decorated with red favours, on the greasy table. He was shockingly thin, and so tall that his head disturbed the candle-soot on the ceiling. He said: "Ah, I was waiting for the cavalier to awake."

He stalked round the end of the table, slid between it and the side, and grasped my arm with wrapt earnestness as he settled himself slowly beside me. He wore a red shirt that had become rather black where his long brown ringlets fell on his shoulders; it had tarnished gilt buttons ciphered "G. R.," stolen, I suppose, from some English ship.

"I beg the Señor Caballero to listen to what I have to record," he said, with intense gravity. "I cannot bear this much longer--no, I cannot bear my sufferings much longer."

His face was of a large, classical type; a close-featured, rather long face, with an immense nose that from the front resembled the section of a bell; eyebrows like horseshoes, and very large-pupilled eyes that had the purplish-brown lustre of a horse's. His air was mournful in the extreme, and he began to speak resonantly as if his chest were a sounding-board. He used immensely long sentences, of which I only understood one-half.

"What, then, is the difference between me, Manuel-del-Popolo Isturiz, and this Tomas Castro? The Señor Caballero can tell at once. Look at me. I am the finer man. I would have you ask the ladies of Rio Medio, and leave the verdict to them. This Castro is an Andalu--a foreigner. And we, the braves of Rio Medio, will suffer no foreigner to make headway with our ladies. Yet this Andalusian is preferred because he is a humble friend of the great Don, and because he is for a few days given the command. I ask you, Señor, what is the radical difference between me, the sailing captain of this vessel, and him, the fighting captain for a few days? Is it not I that am, as it were, the brains of it, and he only its knife? I ask the Señor Caballero."

I didn't in the least know what to answer. His great eyes wistfully explored my face. I expect I looked bewildered.

"I lay my case at your feet," he continued. "You are to be our chief leader, and, on account of your illustrious birth and renowned intelligence, will occupy a superior position in the council of the notables. Is it not so? Has not the Señor Juez O'Brien so ordained? You will give ear to me, you will alleviate my indignant sufferings?" He implored me with his eyes for a long time.

Manuel-del-Popolo, as he called himself, pushed the hair back from his forehead. I had noticed that the love-locks were plaited with black braid, and that he wore large dirty silk ruffles.

"The caballero" he continued, marking his words with a long, white finger a-tap on the table, "will represent my views to the notables. My position at present, as I have had the honour to observe, is become unbearable. Consider, too, how your worship and I would work together. What lightness for you and me. You will find this Castro unbearably gross. But I--I assure you I am a man of taste--an improvisador--an artist. My songs are celebrated. And yet!..."

He folded his arms again, and waited; then he said, employing his most impressive voice:

"I have influence with the men of Rio. I could raise a riot. We Cubans are a

jealous people; we do not love that foreigners should take our best from us. We do not love it; we will not suffer it. Let this Castro bethink himself and go in peace, leaving us and our ladies. As the proverb says, 'It is well to build a bridge for a departing enemy.'"

He began to peer at me more wistfully, and his eyes grew more luminous than ever. This man, in spite of his grotesqueness, was quite in earnest, there was no doubting that.

"I have a gentle spirit," he began again, "a gentle spirit. I am submissive to the legitimate authorities. What the Señor Juez O'Brien asks me to do, I do. I would put a knife into any one who inconvenienced the Señor Juez O'Brien, who is a good Catholic; we would all do that, as is right and fitting. But this Castro--this Andalous, who is nearly as bad as a heretic! When my day comes, I will have his arms flayed and the soles of his feet, and I will rub red pepper into them; and all the men of Rio who do not love foreigners will applaud. And I will stick little thorns under his tongue, and I will cut off his eyelids with little scissors, and set him facing the sun. Caballero, you would love me; I have a gentle spirit. I am a pleasant companion." He rose and squeezed round the table. "Listen"--his eyes lit up with rapture--"you shall hear me. It is divine--ah, it is very pleasant, you will say."

He seized his mandolin, slung it round his neck, and leant against the bulkhead. The bright light from the port-hole gilded the outlines of his body, as he swayed about and moved his long fingers across the strings; they tinkled metallicly. He sang in a nasal voice:

"'Listen!' the young girls say as they hasten to the barred window. 'Listen! Ah, surely that is the guitar of Man--u--el--del-Popolo, As he glides along the wall in the twilight.'"

It was a very long song. He gesticulated freely with his hand in between the scratching of the strings, which seemed to be a matter of luck. His eyes gazed distantly at the wall above my head. The performance bewildered and impressed me; I wondered if this was what they had carried me off for. It was like being mad. He made a decrescendo tinkling, and his lofty features lapsed into their normal mournfulness.

At that moment Castro put his face round the door, then entered altogether. He sighed in a satisfied manner, and had an air of having finished a laborious undertaking.

"We have arranged the confusion up above," he said to Manuel-del-Popolo; "you

may go and see to the sailing. . . . Hurry; it is growing late."

Manuel blazed silently, and stalked out of the door as if he had an electric cloud round his head. Tomas Castro turned towards me.

"You are better?" he asked benevolently. "You exerted yourself too much. . . . But still, if you liked-----" He picked up the mandolin, and began negligently scratching the strings. I noticed an alteration in him; he had grown softer in the flesh in the past years; there were little threads of gray in the knotted curls of his beard. It was as if he had lived well, on the whole. He bent his head over the strings, plucked one, tightened a peg, plucked it again, then set the instrument on the table, and dropped on to the mattress. "Will you have some rum?" he said. "You have grown broad and strong, like a bull.... You made those men fly, sacré nom d'une pipe.... One would have thought you were in earnest.... Ah, well!" He stretched himself at length on the mattress, and closed his eyes.

I looked at him to discover traces of irony. There weren't any. He was talking quietly; he even reproved me for having carried the pretence of resistance beyond a joke.

"You fought too much; you struck many men--and hard. You will have made enemies. The picaros of this dirty little town are as conceited as pigs. You must take care, or you will have a knife in your back."

He lay with his hands crossed on his stomach, which was round like a pudding. After a time he opened his eyes, and looked at the dancing white reflection of the water on the grimy ceiling.

"To think of seeing you again, after all these years," he said. "I did not believe my ears when Don Carlos asked me to fetch you like this. Who would have believed it? But, as they say," he added philosophically, "'The water flows to the sea, and the little stones find their places.'" He paused to listen to the sounds that came from above. "That Manuel is a fool," he said without rancour; "he is mad with jealousy because for this day I have command here. But, all the same, they are dangerous pigs, these slaves of the Señor O'Brien. I wish the town were rid of them. One day there will be a riot--a function--with their jealousies and madness."

I sat and said nothing, and things fitted themselves together, little patches of information going in here and there like the pieces of a puzzle map. O'Brien had gone on to Havana in the ship from which I had escaped, to render an account of the pirates that had been hung at Kingston; the Riegos had been landed in boats at Rio Medio, of course.



"That poor Don Carlos!" Castro moaned lamentably. "They had the barbarity to take him out in the night, in that raw fog. He coughed and coughed; it made me faint to hear him. He could not even speak to me--his Tomas; it was pitiful. He could not speak when we got to the Casa."

I could not really understand why I had been a second time kidnapped. Castro said that O'Brien had not been unwilling that I should reach Havana. It was Carlos that had ordered Tomas to take me out of the Breeze. He had come down in the raw morning, before the schooner had put out from behind the point, to impress very elaborate directions upon Tomas Castro; indeed, it was whilst talking to Tomas that he had burst a blood-vessel.

"He said to me: 'Have a care now. Listen. He is my dear friend, that Señor Juan. I love him as if he were my only brother. Be very careful, Tomas Castro. Make it appear that he comes to us much against his will. Let him be dragged on board by many men. You are to understand, Tomas, that he is a youth of noble family, and that you are to be as careful of compromising him as you are of the honour of Our Lady.'!"

Tomas Castro looked across at me. "You will be able to report well of me," he said; "I did my best. If you are compromised, it was you who did it by talking to me as if you knew me."

I remembered, then, that Tomas certainly had resented my seeming to recognize him before Cowper and Lumsden. He closed his eyes again. After a time he added:

"Vaya! After all, it is foolishness to fear being compromised. You would never believe that his Excellency Don Balthasar had led a riotous life--to look at him with his silver head. It is said he had three friars killed once in Seville, a very, very long time ago. It was dangerous in those days to come against our Mother, the Church." He paused, and undid his shirt, laying bare an incredibly hairy chest; then slowly kicked off his shoes. "One stifles here," he said. "Ah! in the old days-----"

Suddenly he turned to me and said, with an air of indescribable interest, as if he were gloating over an obscene idea:

"So they would hang a gentleman like you, if they caught you? What savages you English people are!--what savages! Like cannibals! You did well to make that comedy of resisting. Quel pays!... What a people... I dream of them still.... The eyes; the teeth! Ah, well! in an hour we shall be in Rio. I must sleep...."



