

## **PART FOURTH -- BLADE AND GUITAR**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

There was a slight, almost imperceptible jar, a faint grating noise, a whispering sound of sand--and the boat, without a splash, floated.

The earth, slipping as it were away from under the keel, left us borne upon the waters of the bay, which were as still as the windless night itself. The pushing off of that boat was like a launching into space, as a bird opens its wings on the brow of a cliff, and remains poised in the air. A sense of freedom came to me, the unreasonable feeling of exultation--as if I had been really a bird essaying its flight for the first time. Everything, sudden and evil and most fortunate, had been arranged for me, as though I had been a lay figure on which Romance had been wreaking its bewildering unexpectedness; but with the floating clear of the boat, I felt somehow that this escape I had to manage myself.

It was dark. Dipping cautiously the blade of the oar, I gave another push against the shelving shore. Seraphina sat, cloaked and motionless, and Tomas Castro, in the bows, made no sound. I didn't even hear him breathe. Everything was left to me. The boat, impelled afresh, made a slight ripple, and my elation was replaced in a moment by all the torments of the most acute anxiety.

I gave another push, and then lost the bottom. Success depended upon my resource, readiness, and courage. And what was this success? Immediately, it meant getting out of the bay, and into the open sea in a twelve-foot dinghy looted from some ship years ago by the Rio Medio pirates, if that miserable population of sordid and ragged outcasts of the Antilles deserved such a romantic name. They were sea-thieves.

Already the wooded shoulder of a mountain was thrown out intensely black by the glow in the sky behind. The moon was about to rise. A great anguish took my heart as if in a vice. The stillness of the dark shore struck me as unnatural. I imagined the yell of the discovery breaking it, and the fancy caused me a greater emotion than the thing itself, I flatter myself, could possibly have done. The unusual silence in which, through the open portals, the altar of the cathedral alone blazed with many flames upon the bay, seemed to enter my very heart violently, like a sudden access of anguish. The two in the boat with me were

silent, too. I could not bear it.

"Seraphina," I murmured, and heard a stifled sob.

"It is time to take the oars, Señor," whispered Castro suddenly, as though he had fallen asleep as soon as he had scrambled into the bows, and only had awaked that instant. "The mists in the middle of the bay will hide us when the moon rises."

It was time--if we were to escape. Escape where? Into the open sea? With that silent, sorrowing girl by my side! In this miserable cockleshell, and without any refuge open to us? It was not really a hesitation; she could not be left at the mercy of O'Brien. It was as though I had for the first time perceived how vast the world was; how dangerous; how unsafe. And there was no alternative. There could be no going back.

Perhaps, if I had known what was before us, my heart would have failed me utterly out of sheer pity. Suddenly my eyes caught sight of the moon making like the glow of a bush fire on the black slope of the mountain. In a moment it would flood the bay with light, and the schooner anchored off the beach before the Casa Riego was not eighty yards away. I dipped my oar without a splash. Castro pulled with his one hand.

The mists rising on the lowlands never filled the bay, and I could see them lying in moonlight across the outlet like a silvery white ghost of a wall. We penetrated it, and instantly became lost to view from the shore.

Castro, pulling quickly, turned his head, and grunted at a red blur very low in the mist. A fire was burning on the low point of land where Nichols--the Nova Scotian--had planted the battery which had worked such havoc with Admiral Rowley's boats. It was a mere earthwork and some of the guns had been removed. The fire, however, warned us that there were some people on the point. We ceased rowing for a moment, and Castro explained to me that a fire was always lit when any of these thieves' boats were stirring. There would be three or four men to keep it up. On this very night Manuel-del-Popolo was outside with a good many rowboats, waiting on the Indiaman. The ship had been seen nearing the shore since noon. She was becalmed now. Perhaps they were looting her already.

This fact had so far favoured our escape. There had been no strollers on the beach that night. Since the investment of the Casa Riego, Castro had lived amongst the besiegers on his prestige of a superior person, of a caballero skilled in war and diplomacy. No one knew how much the tubby, saturnine little man was in the confidence of the Juez O'Brien; and there was no doubt that he was a

good Catholic. He was a very grave, a very silent caballero. In reality his heart had been broken by the death of Carlos, and he did not care what happened to him. His action was actuated by his scorn and hate of the Rio Medio population, rather than by any friendly feeling towards myself.

On that night Domingo's partisans were watching the Casa Riego, while Manuel (who was more of a seaman) had taken most of his personal friends, and all the larger boats that would float, to do a bit of "outside work," as they called it, upon the becalmed West Indiaman.

This had facilitated Castro's plan, and it also accounted for the smallness of the boat, which was the only one of the refuse lot left on the beach that did not gape at every seam. She was not tight by any means, though. I could hear the water washing above the bottom-boards, and I remember how concern about keeping Seraphina's feet dry mingled with the grave apprehensions of our enterprise.

We had been paddling an easy stroke. The red blurr of the fire on the point was growing larger, while the diminished blaze of lights on the high altar of the cathedral pierced the mist with an orange ray.

"The boat should be baled out," I remarked in a whisper.

Castro laid his oar in and made his way to the thwart. It shows how well we were prepared for our flight, that there was not even a half-cocoanut shell in the boat. A gallon earthenware jar, stoppered with a bunch of grass, contained all our provision of fresh water. Castro displaced it, and, bending low, tried to bale with his big, soft hat. I should imagine that he found it impracticable, because, suddenly, he tore off one of his square-toed shoes with a steel buckle. He used it as a scoop, blaspheming at the necessity, but in a very low mutter, out of respect for Seraphina.

Standing up in the stern-sheets by her side, I kept on sculling gently. Once before I had gone desperately to sea--escaping the gallows, perhaps--in a very small boat, with the drunken song of Rangley's uncle heralding the fascination of the unknown to a very callow youth. That night had been as dark, but the danger had been less great. The boat, it is true, had actually sunk under us, but then it was only the sea that might have swallowed me who knew nothing of life, and was as much a stranger to fate as the animals on our farm. But now the world of men stood ready to devour us, and the Gulf of Mexico was of no more account than a puddle on a road infested by robbers. What were the dangers of the sea to the passions amongst which I was launched--with my high fortunes in my hand, and, like all those who live and love, with a sword suspended above my head?

The danger had been less great on that old night, when I had heard behind me the soft crash of the smugglers' feet on the shingle. It had been less great, and, if it had had a touch of the sordid, it had led me to this second and more desperate escape--in a cockleshell, carrying off a silent and cloaked figure, which quickened my heart-beats at each look. I was carrying her off from the evil spells of the Casa Riego, as a knight a princess from an enchanted castle. But she was more to me than any princess to any knight.

There was never anything like that in the world. Lovers might have gone, in their passion, to a certain death; but never, it seemed to me, in the history of youth, had they gone in such an atmosphere of cautious stillness upon such a reckless adventure. Everything depended upon slipping out through the gullet of the bay without a sound. The men on the point had no means of pursuit, but, if they heard or saw anything, they could shout a warning to the boats outside. These were the real dangers--my first concern. Afterwards... I did not want to think of afterwards. There were only the open sea and the perilous coast. Perhaps, if I thought of them, I should give up.

I thought only of gaining each successive moment and concentrated all my faculties into an effort of stealthiness. I handled the boat with a deliberation full of tense prudence, as if the oar had been a stalk of straw, as if the water of the bay had been the film of a glass bubble an unguarded movement could have shivered to atoms. I hardly breathed, for the feeling that a deeper breath would have blown away the mist that was our sole protection now.

It was not blown away. On the contrary, it clung closer to us, with the enveloping chill of a cloud wreathing a mountain crag. The vague shadows and dim outlines that had hung around us began, at last, to vanish utterly in an impenetrable and luminous whiteness. And through the jumble of my thoughts darted the sudden knowledge that there was a sea-fog outside--a thing quite different from the nightly mists of the bay. It was rolling into the passage inexplicably, for no stir of air reached us. It was possible to watch its endless drift by the glow of the fire on the point, now much nearer us. Its edges seemed to melt away in the flight of the water-dust. It was a sea-fog coming in. Was it disastrous to us, or favourable? It, at least, answered our immediate need for concealment, and this was enough for me, when all our future hung upon every passing minute.

The Rio picaroons, when engaged in thieving from some ship becalmed on the coast, began by towing one of their schooners as far as the entrance. They left her there as a rallying point for the boats, and to receive the booty.

One of these schooners, as I knew, was moored opposite the Casa Riego. The other might be lying at anchor somewhere right in the fairway ahead, within a few

yards. I strained my ears for some revealing sound from her, if she were there--a cough, a voice, the creak of a block, or the fall of something on her deck. Nothing came. I began to fear lest I should run stem on into her side without a moment's warning. I could see no further than the length of our twelve-foot boat.

To make certain of avoiding that danger, I decided to shave close the spit of sand that tipped the narrow strip of lowland to the south. I set my teeth, and sheered in resolutely.

Castro remained on the after-thwart, with his elbows on his knees. His head nearly touched my leg. I could distinguish the woeful, bent back, the broken swaying of the plume in his hat. Seraphina's perfect immobility gave me the measure of her courage, and the silence was so profoundly pellucid that the flutter of the flames that we were nearing began to come loud out of the blur of the glow. Then I heard the very crackling of the wood, like a fusillade from a great distance. Even then Castro did not deign to turn his head.

Such as he was--a born vagabond, contrabandista, spy in armed camps, sutler at the tail of the Grande Armée (escaped, God only knows how, from the snows of Russia), beggar, guerrillero, bandit, sceptically murderous, draping his rags in saturnine dignity--he had ended by becoming the sinister and grotesque squire of our quixotic Carlos. There was something romantically sombre in his devotion. He disdained to turn round at the danger, because he had left his heart on the coffin as a lesser affection would have laid a wreath. I looked down at Seraphina. She too, had left a heart in the vaults of the cathedral. The edge of the heavy cloak drawn over her head concealed her face from me, and, with her face, her ignorance, her great doubts, her great fears.

I heard, above the crackling of dry wood, a husky exclamation of surprise, and then a startled voice exclaiming:

"Look! Santissima Madre! What is this?"

Sheer instinct altered at once the motion of my hand so as to incline the bows of the dinghy away from the shore; but a sort of stupefying amazement seized upon my soul. We had been seen. It was all over. Was it possible? All over, already?

In my anxiety to keep clear of the schooner which, for all I know to this day, may not have been there at all, I had come too close to the sand, so close that I heard soft, rapid footfalls stop short in the fog. A voice seemed to be asking me in a whisper:

"Where, oh, where?"

Another cried out irresistibly, "I see it."

It was a subdued cry, as if hushed in sudden awe.

My arm swung to and fro; the turn of my wrist went on imparting the propelling motion of the oar. All the rest of my body was gripped helplessly in the dead expectation of the end, as if in the benumbing seconds of a fall from a towering height. And it was swift, too. I felt a draught at the back of my neck--a breath of wind. And instantly, as if a battering-ram had been let swing past me at many layers of stretched gauze, I beheld, through a tattered deep hole in the fog, a roaring vision of flames, borne down and springing up again; a dance of purple gleams on the strip of unveiled water, and three coal-black figures in the light.

One of them stood high on lank black legs, with long black arms thrown up stiffly above the black shape of a hat. The two others crouched low on the very edge of the water, peering as if from an ambush.

The clearness of this vision was contained by a thick and fiery atmosphere, into which a soft white rush and swirl of fog fell like a sudden whirl of snow. It closed down and overwhelmed at once the tall flutter of the flames, the black figures, the purple gleams playing round my oar. The hot glare had struck my eyeballs once, and had melted away again into the old, fiery stain on the mended fabric of the fog. But the attitudes of the crouching men left no room for doubt that we had been seen. I expected a sudden uplifting of voices on the shore, answered by cries from the sea, and I screamed excitedly at Castro to lay hold of his oar.

He did not stir, and after my shout, which must have fallen on the scared ears with a weird and unearthly note, a profound silence attended us--the silence of a superstitious fear. And, instead of howls, I heard, before the boat had travelled its own short length, a voice that seemed to be the voice of fear itself asking, "Did you hear that?" and a trembling mutter of an invocation to all the saints. Then a strangled throat trying to pronounce firmly, "The souls of the dead Inglez. Crying from pain."

Admiral Rowley's seamen, so miserably thrown away in the ill-conceived attack on the bay, were making a ghostly escort for our escape. Those dead boats'-crews were supposed to haunt the fatal spot, after the manner of spectres that linger in remorse, regret, or revenge, about the gates of departure. I had blundered; the fog, breaking apart, had betrayed us. But my obscure and vanquished countrymen held possession of the outlet by the memory of their courage. In this critical moment it was they, I may say, who stood by us.

We, on our part, must have been disclosed, dark, indistinct, utterly inexplicable; completely unexpected; an apparition of stealthy shades. The painful voice in the fog said:

"Let them be. Answer not. They shall pass on, for none of them died on the shore--all in the water. Yes, all in the water."

I suppose the man was trying to reassure himself and his companions. His meaning, no doubt, was that, being on shore, they were safe from the ghosts of those Ingles who had never achieved a landing. From the enlarging and sudden deepening of the glow, I knew that they were throwing more brushwood on the fire.

I kept on sculling, and gradually the sharp fusillade of dry twigs grew more distant, more muffled in the fog. At last it ceased altogether. Then a weakness came over me, and, hauling my oar in, I sat down by Sera-phina's side. I longed for the sound of her voice, for some tender word, for the caress of a murmur upon my perplexed soul. I was sure of her, as of a conquered and rare treasure, whose possession simplifies life into a sort of adoring guardianship--and I felt so much at her mercy that an overwhelming sense of guilt made me afraid to speak to her. The slight heave of the open sea swung the boat up and down.

Suddenly Castro let out a sort of lugubrious chuckle, and, in low tones, I began to upbraid him with his apathy. Even with his one arm he should have obeyed my call to the oar. It was incomprehensible to me that we had not been fired at. Castro enlightened me, in a few moody and scornful words. The Rio Medio people, he commented upon the incident, were fools, of bestial nature, afraid of they knew not what.

"Castro, the valour of these dead countrymen of mine was not wasted; they have stood by us like true friends," I whispered in the excitement of our escape.

"These insensate English," he grumbled....

"A dead enemy would have served the turn better. If the caballero had none other than dead friends...."

His harsh, bitter mumble stopped. Then Sera-phina's voice said softly:

"It is you who are the friend, Tomas Castro. To you shall come a friend's reward."

"Alas, Señorita!" he sighed. "What remains for me in this world--for me who have given for two masses for the souls of that illustrious man, and of your cousin Don

Carlos, my last piece of silver?"

"We shall make you very rich, Tomas Castro," she said with decision, as if there had been bags of gold in the boat.

He returned a high-flown phrase of thanks in a bitter, absent whisper. I knew well enough that the help he had given me was not for money, not for love--not even for loyalty to the Riegos. It was obedience to the last recommendation of Carlos. He ran risks for my safety, but gave me none of his allegiance.

He was still the same tubby, murderous little man, with a steel blade screwed to the wooden stump of his forearm, as when, swelling his breast, he had stepped on his toes before me like a bloodthirsty pigeon, in the steerage of the ship that had brought us from home. I heard him mumble, with almost incredible, sardonic contempt, that, indeed, the senor would soon have none but dead friends if he refrained from striking at his enemies. Had the senor taken the very excellent opportunity afforded by Providence, and that any sane Christian man would have taken--to let him stab the Juez O'Brien--we should not then be wandering in a little boat. What folly! What folly! One little thrust of a knife, and we should all have been now safe in our beds....

His tone was one of weary superiority, and I remained appalled by that truth, stripped of all chivalrous pretence. It was clear, in sparing that defenceless life, I had been guilty of cruelty for the sake of my conscience. There was Seraphina by my side; it was she who had to suffer. I had let her enemy go free, because he had happened to be near me, disarmed. Had I acted like an Englishman and a gentleman, or only like a fool satisfying his sentiment at other people's expense? Innocent people, too, like the Riego servants, Castro himself; like Seraphina, on whom my high-minded forbearance had brought all these dangers, these hardships, and this uncertain fate.

She gave no sign of having heard Castro's words. The silence of women is very impenetrable, and it was as if my hold upon the world--since she was the whole world for me--had been weakened by that shade of decency of feeling which makes a distinction between killing and murder. But suddenly I felt, without her cloaked figure having stirred, her small hand slip into mine. Its soft warmth seemed to go straight to my heart soothing, invigorating--as it she had slipped into my palm a weapon of extraordinary and inspiring potency.

"Ah, you are generous," I whispered close to the edge of the cloak overshadowing her face.

"You must now think of yourself, Juan," she said.



"Of myself," I echoed sadly. "I have only you to think of, and you are so far away--out of my reach. There are your dead--all your loss, between you and me."

She touched my arm.

"It is I who must think of my dead," she whispered. "But you, you must think of yourself, because I have nothing of mine in this world now."

Her words affected me like the whisper of remorse. It was true. There were her wealth, her lands, her palaces; but her only refuge was that little boat. Her father's long aloofness from life had created such an isolation round his closing years that his daughter had no one but me to turn to for protection against the plots of her own Intendente. And, at the thought of our desperate plight, of the suffering awaiting us in that small boat, with the possibility of a lingering death for an end, I wavered for a moment. Was it not my duty to return to the bay and give myself up? In that case, as Castro expressed it, our throats would be cut for love of the Juez.

But Seraphina, the rabble would carry to the Casa on the palms of their hands--out of veneration for the family, and for fear of O'Brien.

"So, Señor," he mumbled, "if to you to-morrow's sun is as little as to me let us pull the boat's head, round."

"Let us set our hands to the side and overturn it, rather," Seraphina said, with an indignation of high command.

I said no more. If I could have taken O'Brien with me into the other world, I would have died to save her the pain of so much as a pinprick. But because I could not, she must even go with me; must suffer because I clung to her as men cling to their hope of highest good--with an exalted and selfish devotion.

Castro had moved forward, as if to show his readiness to pull round. Meantime I heard a click. A feeble gleam fell on his misty hands under the black halo of the hat rim. Again the flint and blade clicked, and a large red spark winked rapidly in the bows. He had lighted a cigarette.