

## CHAPTER TWO

Silence, stillness, breathless caution were the absolute conditions of our existence. But I hadn't the heart to remonstrate with him for the danger he caused Seraphina and myself. The fog was so thick now that I could not make out his outline, but I could smell the tobacco very plainly.

The acrid odour of picadura seemed to knit the events of three years into one uninterrupted adventure. I remembered the shingle beach; the deck of the old Thames. It brought to my mind my first vision of Seraphina, and the emblazoned magnificence of Carlos' sick bed. It all came and went in a whiff of smoke; for of all the power and charm that had made Carlos so seductive there remained no such deep trace in the world as in the heart of the little grizzled bandit who, like a philosopher, or a desperado, puffed his cigarette in the face of the very spirit of murder hovering round us, under the mask and cloak of the fog. And by the serene heaven of my life's evening, the spirit of murder became actually audible to us in hasty and rhythmical knocks, accompanied by a cheerful tinkling.

These sounds, growing swiftly louder, at last induced Castro to throw away his cigarette. Seraphina clutched my arm. The noise of oars rowing fast, to the precipitated jingling of a guitar, swooped down upon us with a gallant ferocity.

"Caramba," Castro muttered; "it is the fool Manuel himself!"

I said, then: "We have eight shots between us two, Tomas."

He thrust his brace of pistols upon my knees.

"Dispose of them as your worship pleases," he muttered.

"You mustn't give up, yet," I whispered.

"What is it that I give up?" he mumbled wearily. "Besides, there grows from my forearm a blade. If I shall find myself indisposed to quit this world alone.... Listen to the singing of that imbecile."

A carolling falsetto seemed to hang muffled in upper space, above the fog that settled low on the water, like a dense and milky sediment of the air. The moonlight fell into it strangely. We seemed to breathe at the bottom of a shallow sea, white as snow, shining like silver, and impenetrably opaque everywhere, except overhead, where the yellow disc of the moon glittered through a thin cloud

of steam. The gay truculence of the hollow knocking, the metallic jingle, the shrill trolling, went on crescendo to a burst of babbling voices, a mad speed of tinkling, a thundering shout, "Altro, Amigos!" followed by a great clatter of oars flung in. The sudden silence pulsated with the ponderous strokes of my heart.

To escape now seemed impossible. At least it seemed impossible while they talked. A dark spot in the shining expanse of fog swam into view. It shifted its place after I had first made it out, and then remained motionless, astern of the dinghy. It was the shadow of a big boat full of men, but when they were silent, I was not sure that I saw anything at all. I made no doubt, had they been aware of our nearness, there were amongst them eyes that could have detected us in the same elusive way. But how could they even dream of anything of the kind? They talked noisily, and there must have been a round dozen of them, at the least.

Sometimes they would fall a-shouting all together, and then keep quiet as if listening. By-and-by I began to hear answering yells, that seemed to converge upon us from all directions.

We were in the thick of it. It was Manuel's boat, as Castro had guessed, and the other boats were rallying upon it gropingly, keeping up a succession of yells:

"Ohe! Ohe! Where, where?"

And the people in Manuel's boat howled back at them, "Ohe! Ohe...e! This way; here!"

Suddenly he struck the guitar a mighty blow, and chanted in an inspired and grandiose strain:

"Steer--for--the--song."

His fingers ran riot among the strings, and above the jingling his voice, forced to the highest pitch, declaimed, as in the midst of a tempest:

"I adore the saints in the glory of heaven      And, on the dust of the earth,  
The print of her footsteps."

He was improvising. Sometimes he gasped; the rill of softened tinkle ran on, and, glaring watchfully, I fancied I could detect his shape in the white vapour, like a shadow thrown from afar by a tallow dip upon a snowy sheet--the lank droop of his posturing, the greasy locks, the attentive poise of his head, the sentimental rolling of his lustrous and enormous eyes.

I had not forgotten his astonishing display in the cabin of the schooner when, after the confiding of his woes and his ambitions, he had favoured me with a sample of his art. As at that time, when he had been nursing his truculent conceit, he sang, and the unsteady twanging of his guitar lurched and staggered far behind his voice, like a drunken slave in the footsteps of a raving master. Tinkle, tinkle, twang! A headlong rush of muddled fingering; a sudden bang, like a heavy stumble.

"She is the proud daughter of the old Castile! Olà! Olà!" he chanted mysteriously at the beginning of every stanza in a rapturous and soft ecstasy, and then would shriek, as though he had been suddenly cast up on the rock. The poet of Rio Medio was rallying his crew of thieves to a rhapsody of secret and unrequited passion. Twang, ping, tinkle tinkle. He was the Capataz of the valiant Lugareños! The true Capataz! The only Capataz. Olà! Olà! Twang, twang. But he was the slave of her charms, the captive of her eyes, of her lips, of her hair, of her eyebrows, which, he proclaimed in a soaring shriek, were like rainbows arched over stars.

It was a love-song, a mournful parody, the odious grimacing of an ape to the true sorrow of the human face. I could have fled from it, as from an intolerable humiliation. And it would have been easy to pull away unheard while he sang, but I had a plan, the beginning of a plan, something like the beginning of a hope. And for that I should have to use the fog for the purpose of remaining within earshot.

Would the fog last long enough to serve my turn? That was the only question, and I believed it would, for it settled lower; it settled down denser, almost too heavy to be stirred by the fitful efforts of the breeze. It was a true night fog of the tropics, that, born after sunset, tries to creep back into the warm bosom of the sea before sunrise. Once in Rio Medio, taking a walk in the early morning along the sand-dunes, I had stood watching below me the heads of some people, fishing from a boat, emerge strangely in the dawn out of such a fog. It concealed their very shoulders more completely than water could have done. I trusted it would not come so soon to our heads, emerging, though it seemed to me that already, by merely clambering on Castro's shoulders, I could attain to clear moonlight; see the highlands of the coast, the masts of the English ship. She could not be very far off if only one could tell the direction. But an unsteady little dinghy was not the platform for acrobatic exercises, and Castro not exactly the man.

The slightest noise would have betrayed us, and moreover, the thing was no good, for even supposing I had got a hurried sight of the ship's spars, I should have to get down into the fog to pull, and there would be nothing visible to keep us from going astray, unless at every dozen strokes I clambered on Castro's shoulders

again to rectify the direction--an obviously impracticable and absurd proceeding.

"She is the proud daughter of old Castile, Olà, Olà," Manuel sang confidentially with a subdued and gallant lilt... Obviously impracticable. But I had another idea.

"Tinkle tinkle pinnng... Brrroum. Brrroum. My soul yearns for the alms of a smile. For a forgiving glance yearns my lofty soul..."

he sang. Ah, if one could have added another four feet to one's stature. Four or five feet only. There seemed to be nothing but a thin veil between me and the moon. No more than a thin haze. But at the level of my eyes everything was hidden. From behind the white veil came the crying of the strings, a screeching, lugubrious and fierce in its artificial transport, as if it were mocking my sad and ardent conviction of un-worthiness, the crowning torment, and the inward pride of pure love. In the breathless pauses I could hear the hollow bumping of gunwales knocking against each other; faint splashings of oars; the distant hail of some laggards groping their way on the shrouded sea.

The note of cruel passion that runs in the blood held these cut-throats profoundly silent in their boats, as at home I could imagine a party of smugglers (they would not stick at a murder or two, either) listening, with pensive faces, to a sentimental ditty of some "sweet Nancy," howled dismally within the walls of a wayside taproom in the smoke of pipes. I seemed to understand profoundly the difference of races that brings with it the feeling of romance or awakens hate. My gorge rose at Manuel's song. I hated his lamentations. "Alas, alas; in vain, in vain." He strummed with vertiginous speed, with fury, and the distracted clamour of his voice, wrestling madly with the ringing madness of the strings, ended in a piercing and supreme shriek.

"Finished. It is finished." A low and applauding murmur flowed to my ears, the austere acclamations of connoisseurs. "Viva, viva, Manuele!"--a squeak of fervid admiration. "Ah, our Manuelito..." But a gruff voice discoursed jovially, "Care not, Manuel. What of Paquita with the broken tooth? Is she not left to thee? And por Dios, hombres, in the dark all women are alike."

"I will cram thy unclean mouth with live coals," Manuel drawled spitefully.

They roared with laughter at this sally. I depicted to myself their shapes, their fierce gesticulations, their earrings, bound heads, rags, and weapons, the vile scowls on their swarthy, grimacing faces. My anxiety beheld them as plainly as anything seen with the eyes of the body. And, with my sharpened hearing catching every word with preternatural distinctness, I felt as if, the ring of Gyges on my finger, I had sat invisible at the council of my enemies.

It was noisy, animated, with an issue of supreme interest for us. The ship, seen at midday standing inshore with a light wind, had not approached the bay near enough to be conveniently attacked till just after dusk. They had waited for her all the afternoon, sleeping and gambling on the spit of sand. But something heavy in her appearance had excited their craven suspicions, and checked their ardour. She appeared to them dangerous. What if she were an English man-of-war disguised? Some even pretended to recognize in her positively one of the lighter frigates of Rowley's squadron. Night had fallen whilst they squabbled, and their flotilla hung under the land, the men in a conflict of rapacity and fear, arguing among themselves as to the ship's character, but all unanimously goading Manuel--since he would call himself their only Capataz--to go boldly and find out.

It seems he had just been doing this with the help of a few choicer spirits, and under cover of the fog. They had managed to steal near enough to hear Englishmen conversing on board, orders given, and the yo-hoing of invisible sailors, trimming the yards of the ship to the fitful airs. This last, of course, was decisive. Such sounds are not heard on a man-of-war. She was a merchant ship: she would be an easy prey. And Manuel, in a state of exaltation at his venturesome bravery, had pulled back inshore, to rally all the boats round his own, and lead them to certain plunder. They would soon find out, he declaimed, what it was to have at their head their own valiant Manuel, instead of that vagabond, that stranger, that Andalusian starveling; that traitor, that infidel, that Castro. Hidden away, he seemed to spout all this for our ears alone, as though he could see us in our boat.... Patience; patience! Some day he would cut off that interloper's eyelids, and lay him on his back under a nice clear sun. Castro made a brusque movement; a little shudder of disgust escaped Seraphina.... Meantime, Manuel declared, by his audacity, that ship was as good as theirs already. "Viva el Capataz!" they cheered.

The cloud-like vapours resting on the sea muffled the short roar; we heard grim laughter, excited cries. He began to make a set speech, and his voice, haranguing with vehement inflections in the shining whiteness of a cloud, had an amazing and uncorporeal character; the quality of abstract surprise; of phenomenal emotion shouted into empty space. And for me it had, also, the fascination of a revealed depth.

It was like the oration of an ambitious leader in a farce; he held his hearers with his eloquence, as much as he had done with the song of his grotesque and desecrating love. He vaunted his sagacity and his valour, and overwhelmed with invective all sorts of names--my own and Castro's among them. He revealed the unholy ideals of all that band of scoundrels--ideals that he said should find fruition under his captaincy. He boasted of secret conferences with O'Brien. There

were murmurs of satisfaction.

I don't wonder at Seraphina's shudder of horror, of disgust, of dismay, and indignation. Robbed of the inexpugnable shelter of the Casa Riego, she, too, was made to look into the depths; upon the animalism, the lusts, and the reveries of that sordid, vermin-haunted crowd. I felt for her a profound and shamed sorrow. It was like a profaning touch on the sacredness of her mourning for the dead, and on her clear and passionate vision of life.

"Hombres de Rio Medio! Amigos! Valientes!..." Manuel was beginning his peroration. He would lead them, now, against the English ship. The terrified heretics would surrender. There was always gold in English ships. He stopped his speech, and then called loudly, "Let the boats keep touch with each other, and not stray in that fog."

"The dog," grunted Castro. We heard a resolute bustle of preparation; oars were being shipped.

"Make ready, Tomas," I whispered.

"Ready for what?" he grumbled. "Where shall your worship run from these swine?"

"We must follow them," I answered.

"The madness of the senor's countrymen descends upon him," he whispered with sardonic politeness. "Wherefore follow?"

"To find the English ship," I answered swiftly.

This, from the moment we had heard Manuel's guitar, had been my idea. Since the fog that concealed us from their sight made us, too, hopelessly blind, those wretches must guide us themselves out of their own clutches, as it were. I don't put this forward as an inspired conception. It was a most risky and almost hopeless expedient; but the position was so critical that there was no other alternative to sitting still and waiting with folded hands for discovery. Castro seemed more inclined for the latter.

Fortunately, the bandits wasted some time in blasphemous bickerings as to the order of the boats in the procession of attack. I urged my views upon Castro in hurried whispers. His assent was of importance, since he could use an oar very well, and, if left to myself, I could not hope to scull fast enough to keep within hearing of the flotilla.

"Of what use to us would be a ship in Manuel's power?" he argued morosely. On the other hand, if we waited near her till she had been plundered and released, neither the fog nor the night would last forever.

"My countrymen will beat them off," I affirmed confidently. "At any rate, let us be on the spot. We may take a hand. And remember, Tomas, they are not led by you, this time."

"True," he said, mollified. "But one thing more deserves the consideration of your worship... If we follow this plan, we take the senorita among flying bullets. And lead, alas! unlike steel, is blind, or that illustrious man would not now be dead. If we wait here, the senorita, at least, shall take no harm from these ruffians, as I have said."

"Are you afraid of the bullets?" I asked Seraphina.

Before she had answered, Castro hissed at me:

"Oh, you unspeakable English. Would you sacrifice the daughter, too, only because she is brave?"

His sinister allusion made my blood boil with rage, and suddenly run cold in my veins. Swathed in the brilliant cloud, we heard the sounds of quarrelling and scrambling die away; cries of "Ready! ready!" an unexpected and brutal laugh. Seraphina leaned forward.

"Tomas, I wish this thing. I command it," she whispered imperiously. "We shall help these English on the ship. We must; I command it. For these are now my people."

I heard him mutter to himself, "h, dear shade of my Carlos. Her people. Where are now mine?" But he shipped his oar, and sat waiting.

In the moment before the picaroons actually started, I became the prey of the most intense anxiety. I knew we were to seaward of the cluster. But of our position relatively to the boats, and to the English ship they would make for, I was profoundly ignorant. The dinghy might be lying right in the way. Before I could master the sort of disorder I was thrown into by that thought--which, strange to say, had not occurred to me till then--with a shrill whistle Manuel led off.

We are always incited to trust, our eyes rather than our ears; and such is the

conventional temper in which we receive the impression of our senses that I had no idea they were so near us. The destruction of my illusory feeling of distance was the most startling thing in the world. Instantly, it seemed, with the second swing and splash of the oars, the boats were right upon us. They went clear. It was like being grazed by a fall of rocks. I seemed to feel the wind of the rush.

The rapid clatter of rowing, the excited hum of voices, the violent commotion of the water, passed by us with an impetuosity that took my breath away. They had started in a bunch. There must have been amongst them at least one crew of negroes, because somebody was beating a tambourine smartly, and the rowers chorused in a quick, panting undertone, "Ho, ho, talibambo.... Ho, ho, talibambo." One of the boats silhouetted herself for an instant, a row of heads swaying back and forth, towered over astern by a full-length figure as straight as an arrow. A retreating voice thundered, "Silence!" The sounds and the forms faded together in the fog with amazing swiftness.

Seraphina, her cloak off, her head bare, stared forward after the fleeting murmurs and shadows we were pursuing. Sometimes she warned us, "More to the left "; or, "Faster!" We had to put forth our best, for Manuel, as if in the very wantonness of confidence, had set a tremendous pace.

I suppose he took his first direction by the light on the point. I cannot tell what guided him after that feeble sheen had become buried in the fog; but there was no check in the speed, no sign of hesitation. We followed in the track of the sound, and, for the most part, kept in sight of the elusive shadow of the sternmost boat. Often, in a denser belt of fog, the sounds of rowing became muffled almost to extinction; or we seemed to hear them all round and, startled, checked our speed. Dark apparitions of boats would surge up on all sides in a most inexplicable way; to the right; to the left; even coming from behind. They appeared real, unmistakable, and, before we had time to dodge them, vanished utterly. Then we had to spurt desperately after the grind of the oars, caught, just in time, in an unexpected direction.

And then we lost them. We pulled frantically. Seraphina had been urging us, "Faster! faster!" From time to time I would ask her, "Can you see them?" "Not yet," she answered curtly. The perspiration poured down my face. Castro's panting was like the wheezing of bellows at my back. Suddenly, in a despairing tone, she said:

"Stop! I can neither see nor hear anything now."

We feathered our oars at once, and fell to listening with lowered heads. The ripple of the boat's way expired slowly. A great white stillness hung slumbrously over the sea.



It was inconceivable. We pulled once or twice with extreme energy for a few minutes after imaginary whistles or shouts. Once I heard them passing our bows. But it was useless; we stopped, and the moon, from within the mistiness of an immense halo, looked dreamily upon our heads.

Castro grunted, "Here is an end of your plan, Señor Don Juan."

The peculiar and ghastly hopelessness of our position could not be better illustrated than by this fresh difficulty. We had lost touch--with a murderous gang that had every inducement not to spare our lives. And positively it was a misfortune; an abandonment. I refused to admit to myself its finality, as if it had reflected upon the devotion of tried friends. I repeated to Castro that we should become aware of them directly--probably even nearer than we wished. And, at any rate, we were certain of a mighty loud noise when the attack on the ship began. She, at least, could not be very far now. "Unless, indeed," I admitted with exasperation, "we are to suppose that your imbecile Lugareños have missed their prey and got themselves as utterly lost as we ourselves."

I was irritated--by his nodding plume; by his cold, perfunctory, as if sleepy mutters, "Possibly, possibly, puede ser." He retorted: "Your English generosity could wish your countrymen no better luck than that my Lugareños, as your worship pleases to call them, should miss their way. They are hungry for loot--with much fasting. And it is hunger that makes your wolf fly straight at the throat."

All the time Seraphina breathed no word. But when I raised my voice, she put out a hushing hand to my arm. And, from her intent pose, from the turn of her shadowy head, I knew that she was peering and listening loyally.

Minutes passed--very few, I dare say--and brought no sound. The restlessness of waiting made us dip our oars in a haphazard stroke, without aim, without the means of judging whether we pulled to seaward, inshore, north, or south, or only in a circle. Once we went excitedly in chase of some splashing that must have been a leaping fish. I was hanging my head over my idle oar when Seraphina touched me.

"I see!" she said, pointing over the bows.

Both Castro and I, peering horizontally over the water, did not see anything. Not a shadow. Moreover, if they were so near, we ought to have heard something.

"I believe it is land!" she murmured. "You are looking too low, Juan."

As soon as I looked up I saw it, too, dark and beetling, like the overhang of a low cliff. Where on earth had we blundered to? For a moment I was confounded. Fiery reflections from a light played faintly above that shape. Then I recognized what I was looking at. We had found the ship.

The fog was so shallow that up there the upper bulk of a heavy, square stern, the very rails and stanchions crowning it like a balustrade, jutted out in the misty sheen like the balcony of an invisible edifice, for the lines of her run, the sides of her hull, were plunged in the dense white layer below. And, throwing back my head, I traced even her becalmed sails, pearly gray pinnacles of shadow uprising, tall and motionless, towards the moon.

A redness wavered over her, as from a blaze on her deck. Could she be on fire? And she was silent as a tomb. Could she be abandoned? I had promised myself to dash alongside, but there was a weirdness in that fragment of a dumb ship hanging out of a fog. We pulled only a stroke or two nearer to the stern, and stopped. I remembered Castro's warning--the blindness of flying lead; but it was the profound stillness that checked me. It seemed to portend something inconceivable. I hailed, tentatively, as if I had not expected to be answered, "Ship, ahoy!"

Neither was I answered by the instantaneous, "Hallo," of usual watchfulness, though she was not abandoned. Indeed, my hail made a good many men jump, to judge by the sounds and the words that came to me from above. "What? What? A hail?" "Boat near?" "In English, sir."

"Dive for the captain, one of you," an authoritative voice directed. "He's just run below for a minute. Don't frighten the missus. Call him out quietly."

Talking, in confidential undertones, followed.

"See him?" "Can't, sir." "What's the dodge, I wonder." "Astern, I think, sir." "D-----n this fog, it lies as thick as pea-soup on the water."

I waited, and after a perplexed sort of pause, heard a stern "Keep off."