

CHAPTER THREE

They did not suspect how close I was to them. And their temper struck me at once as unsafe. They seemed very much on the alert, and, as I imagined, disposed to precipitate action. I called out, deadening my voice warily:

"I am an Englishman, escaping from the pirates here. We want your help."

To this no answer was made, but by that time the captain had come on deck. The dinghy must have drifted in a little closer, for I made out behind the shadowy rail one, two, three figures in a row, looming bulkily above my head, as men appear enlarged in mist.

"'Englishman,' he says." "That's very likely," pronounced a new voice. They held a hurried consultation up there, of which I caught only detached sentences, and the general tone of concern. "It's perfectly well known that there is an Englishman here.... Aye, a runaway second mate.... Killed a man in a Bristol ship.... What was his name, now?"

"Won't you answer me?" I called out.

"Aye, we will answer you as soon as we see you.... Keep your eyes skinned fore and aft on deck there.... Ready, boys?"

"All ready, sir"; voices came from further off.

"Listen to me," I entreated.

Someone called out briskly, "This is a bad place for pretty tales of Englishmen in distress. We know very well where we are."

"You are off Rio Medio," I began anxiously; "and I-----"

"Speaks the truth like a Briton, anyhow," commented a lazy drawl.

"I would send another man to the pump," a reflective voice suggested. "To make sure of the force, Mr. Sebright, you know."

"Certainly, sir.... Another hand to the brakes, bo'sun."

"I have been held captive on shore," I said. "I escaped this evening, three hours

ago."

"And found this ship in the fog? You made a good shot at it, didn't you?"

"It's no time for trifling, I swear to you," I continued. "They are out looking for you, in force. I've heard them. I was with them when they started."

"I believe you."

"They seem to have missed the ship."

"So you came to have a friendly chat meantime. That's kind. Beastly weather, aint it?"

"I want to come aboard," I shouted. "You must be crazy not to believe me."

"But we do believe every single word you say," bantered the Sebright voice with serenity.

Suddenly another struck in, "Nichols, I call to mind, sir."

"Of course, of course. This is the man."

"My name's not Nichols," I protested.

"Now, now. You mustn't begin to lie," remonstrated Sebright. Somebody laughed discreetly.

"You are mistaken, on my honour," I said. "Nichols left Rio Medio some time ago."

"About three hours, eh?" came the drawl of insufferable folly in these precious minutes.

It was clear that Manuel had gone astray, but I feared not for long. They would spread out in search. And now I had found this hopeless ship, it seemed impossible that anybody else could miss her.

"You may be boarded any moment by more than a dozen boats. I warn you solemnly. Will you let me come?"

A low whistle was heard on board. They were impressed, "Why should he tell us this?" an undertone inquired.

"Why the devil shouldn't he? It's no great news, is it? Some scoundrelly trick. This man's up to any dodge. Why, the 'Jane' was taken in broad day by two boats that pretended they were going to sell vegetables."

"Look out, or by heavens you'll be taken by surprise. There's a lot of them," I said as impressively as I could.

"Look out, look out. There's a lot of them," someone yelled in a sort of panic.

"Oh, that's your game," Sebright's voice said to me. "Frighten us, eh? Never you mind what this skunk says, men. Stand fast. We shall take a lot of killing." He was answered by a sort of pugnacious uproar, a clash of cutlasses and laughter, as if at some joke.

"That's right, boys; mind and send them away with clean faces, you gunners. Jack, you keep a good lookout for that poor distressed Englishman. What's that? a noise in the fog? Stand by. Now then, cook!..."

"All ready to dish up, sir," a voice answered him.

It was like a sort of madness. Were they thinking of eating? Even at that the English talk made my heart expand--the homeliness of it. I seemed to know all their voices, as if I had talked to each man before. It brought back memories, like the voices of friends.

But there was the strange irrelevancy, levity, the enmity--the irrational, baffling nature of the anguishing conversation, as if with the unapproachable men we meet in nightmares.

We in the dinghy, as well as those on board, were listening anxiously. A profound silence reigned for a time.

"I don't care for myself," I tried once more, speaking distinctly. "But a lady in the boat here is in great danger, too. Won't you do something for a woman?"

I perceived, from the sort of stir on board, that this caused some sensation.

"Or is the whole ship's company afraid to let one little boat come alongside?" I added, after waiting for an answer.

A throat was cleared on board mildly, "Hem... you see, we don't know who you are."

"I've told you who I am. The lady is Spanish."

"Just so. But there are Englishmen and Englishmen in these days. Some of them keep very bad company ashore, and others afloat. I couldn't think of taking you on board, unless I know something more of you."

I seemed to detect an intention of malice in the mild voice. The more so that I overheard a rapid interchange of mutterings up there. "See him yet?" "Not a thing, sir." "Wait, I say."

Nothing could overcome the fixed idea of these men, who seemed to enjoy so much the cleverness of their suspicions. It was the most dangerous of tempers to deal with. It made them as untrustworthy as so many lunatics. They were capable of anything, of decoying us alongside, and stoving the bottom out of the boat, and drowning us before they discovered their mistake, if they ever did. Even as it was, there was danger; and yet I was extremely loath to give her up. It was impossible to give her up. But what were we to do? What to say? How to act?

"Castro, this is horrible," I said blankly. That he was beginning to chafe, to fret, and shuffle his feet only added to my dismay. He might begin at any moment to swear in Spanish, and that was sure to bring a shower of lead, blind, fired blindly. "We have nothing to expect from the people of that ship. We cannot even get on board."

"Not without Manuel's help, it seems," he said bitterly. "Strange, is it not, Señor? Your countrymen--your excellent and virtuous countrymen. Generous and courageous and perspicacious."

Seraphina said suddenly, "They have reason. It is well for them to be suspicious of us in this place." She had a tone of calm reproof, and of faith.

"They shall be of more use when they are dead," Castro muttered. "The señor's other dead countrymen served us well."

"I shall give you great, very great sums of money," Seraphina suddenly cried towards the ship. "I am the Señorita Seraphina Riego."

"There is a woman--that's a woman's voice, I'll swear," I heard them exclaim on board, and I cried again:

"Yes, yes. There is a woman."

"I dare say. But where do you come in? You are a distressed Englishman, aren't

you?" a voice came back.

"You shall let us come up on your ship," Seraphina said. "I shall come myself, alone--Seraphina Riego."

"Eh, what?" the voice asked.

I felt a little wind on the back of my head. There was desperate hurry.

"We are escaping to get married," I called out. They were beginning to shout orders on the ship. "Oh, you've come to the wrong shop. A church is what you want for that trouble," the voice called back brutally, through the other cries of orders to square the yards.

I shouted again, but my voice must have been drowned in the creaking of blocks and yards. They were alert enough for every chance of getting away--for every flaw of wind. Already the ship was less distinct, as if my eyes had grown dim. By the time a voice on board her cried, "Belay," faintly, she had gone from my sight. Then the puff of wind passed away, too, and left us more alone than ever, with only the small disk of the moon poised vertically above the mists.

"Listen," said Tomas Castro, after what seemed an eternity of crestfallen silence.

He need not have spoken; there could be no doubt that Manuel had lost himself, and my belief is that the ship had sailed right into the midst of the flotilla. There was an unmistakable character of surprise in the distant tumult that arose suddenly, and as suddenly ceased for a space of a breath or two. "Now, Castro," I shouted. "Ha! bueno!"

We gave way with a vigour that seemed to lift the dinghy out of the water. The uproar gathered volume and fierceness.

From the first it was a hand-to-hand contest, engaged in suddenly, as if the assailants had at once managed to board in a body, and, as it were, in one unanimous spring. No shots had been fired. Too far to hear the blows, and seeing nothing as yet of the ship, we seemed to be hastening towards a deadly struggle of voices, of shadows with leathern throats; every cry heard in battle was there--rage, encouragement, fury, hate, and pain. And those of pain were amazingly distinct. They were yells; they were howls. And suddenly, as we approached the ship, but before we could make out any sign of her, we came upon a boat. We had to swerve to clear her. She seemed to have dropped out of the fight in utter disarray; she lay with no oars out, and full of men who writhed and tumbled over each other, shrieking as if they had been flayed. Above the writhing figures in the

middle of the boat, a tall man, upright in the stern-sheets, raved awful imprecations and shook his fists above his head.

The blunt dinghy foamed past that vision within an oar's length, no more, making straight for the clamour of the fight. The last puff of wind must have thinned the fog in the ship's track; for, standing up, face forward to pull stroke, I saw her come out, stern-on to us, from truck to water-line, mistily tall and motionless, but resounding with the most fierce and desperate noises. A cluster of empty boats clung low to her port side, raft-like and vague on the water.

We heard now, mingled with the fury and hate of shouts reverberating from the placid sails, mighty thuds and crashes, as though it had been a combat with clubs and battle-axes.

Evidently, in the surprise and haste of the unexpected coming together, they had been obliged to board all on the same side. As I headed for the other a big boat, full of men, with many oars, shot across our bows, and vanished round the ship's counter in the twinkling of an eye. The defenders, engaged on the port side, were going to be taken in the rear. We were then so close to the counter that the cries of "Death, death," rang over our heads. A voice on the poop said furiously in English, "Stand fast, men." Next moment, we, too, rounded the quarter only twenty feet behind the big boat, but with a slightly wider sweep.

I said, "Have the pistols ready, Seraphina." And she answered quite steadily:

"They are ready, Juan."

I could not have believed that any handiwork of man afloat could have got so much way through the water. To this very day I am not rid of the absurd impression that, at that particular moment, the dinghy was travelling with us as fast as a cannon-ball. No sooner round than we were upon them. We were upon them so fast that I had barely the time to fling away my oar, and close my grip on the butt of the pistols Seraphina pressed into my hand from behind. Castro, too, had dropped his oar, and, turning as swift as a cat, crouched in the bows. I saw his good arm darting out towards their boat.

They had cast a grapnel cleverly, and, swung abreast of the main chains, were grimly busied in boarding the undefended side in silence. One had already his leg over the ship's rail, and below him three more were clambering resolutely, one above the other. The rest of them, standing up in a body with their faces to the ship, were so oblivious of everything in their purpose, that they staggered all together to the shock of the dinghy, heavily, as if the earth had reeled under them.

Castro knew what he was doing. I saw his only hand hop along the gunwale, dragging our cockle-shell forward very swiftly. The tottering Spaniards turned their heads, and for a moment we looked at each other in silence.

I was too excited to shout; the surprise seemed to have deprived them of their senses, and they all had the same grin of teeth closed upon the naked blades of their knives, the same stupid stare fastened upon my eyes. I pulled the trigger in the nearest face, and the terrific din of the fight going on above us was overpowered by the report of the pistol, as if by a clap of thunder. The man's gaping mouth dropped the knife, and he stood stiffly long enough for the thought, "I've missed him," to flash through my mind before he tumbled clean out of the boat without touching anything, like a wooden dummy tipped by the heels. His headlong fall sent the water flying high over the stern of the dinghy. With the second barrel I took a long shot at the man sitting amazed, astride of the rail above. I saw him double up suddenly, and fall inboard sideways, but the fellow following him made a convulsive effort, and leapt out of sight on to the deck of the ship. I dropped the discharged weapon, and fired the first barrel of the other at the upper of the two men clinging halfway up the ship's side. To that one shot they both vanished as if by enchantment, the fellow I had hit knocking off his friend below. The crash of their fall was followed by a great yell.

These had been all nearly point-blank shots, and, anyhow, I had had a good deal of pistol practice. Macdonald had a little gallery at Horton Pen. The Lugareños, huddled together in the boat, were only able to moan with terror. They made soft, pitiful, complaining noises. Two or three took headers overboard, like so many frogs, and then one began to squeak exactly like a rat.

By that time, Castro, with his fixed blade, had cut their grapnel rope close to the ring. As the ship kept forging ahead all the time, the boat of the pirate bumped away lightly from between the vessel and our dinghy, and we remained alongside, holding to the end of the severed line. I sent my fourth shot after them and got in exchange a scream and a howl of "Mercy! mercy! we surrender!" She swung clear of the quarter, all hushed, and faded into the mist and moonlight, with the head and arms of a motionless man hanging grotesquely over the bows.

Leaving Seraphina with Castro, and sticking the remaining pair of pistols in my belt, I swarmed up the rope. The moon, the lights of several lanthorns, the glare from the open doors, mingled violently in the steamy fog between the high bulwarks of the ship. But the character of the contest was changing, even as I paused on the rail to get my bearings. The fellow who had leapt on board to escape my shot had bolted across the deck to his friends on the other side, yelling:

"Fly, fly! The heretics are coming, shooting from the sea. All is lost. Fly, oh fly!"

He had jumped straight overboard, but the infection of his panic was already visible. The cries of "Muerte, muerte! Death, death!" had ceased, and the Englishmen were cheering ferociously. In a moment, under my eyes, the seamen, who had been holding their own with difficulty in a shower of defensive blows, began to dart forward, striking out with their fists, catching with their hands. I jumped upon the main hatch, and found myself in the skirt of the final rush.

A tall Lugareño had possessed himself of one of the ship's capstan bars, and, less craven than the others, was flourishing it on high, aiming at the head of a sailor engaged in throttling a negro whom he held at the full length of his immense arms. I fired, and the Lugareño tumbled down with all the appearance of having knocked himself over with the bar he had that moment uplifted. It rested across his neck as he lay stretched at my feet.

I was not able to effect anything more after this, because the sailor, after rushing his limp antagonist overboard with terrific force, turned raging for more, caught sight of me--an evident stranger--and flew at my throat. He was English, but as he squeezed my windpipe so hard that I couldn't utter a word I brought the butt of my pistol upon his thick skull without the slightest compunction, for, indeed, I had to deal with a powerful man, well able to strangle me with his bare hands, and very determined to achieve the feat. He grunted under the blow, reeled away a few steps, then, charging back at once, gripped me round the body, and tried to lift me off my feet. We fell together into a warm puddle.

I had no idea spilt blood kept its warmth so much. And the quantity of it was appalling; the deck seemed to swim with gore, and we simply weltered in it. We rolled rapidly along the reeking scuppers, amongst the feet of a lot of men who were hopping about us in the greatest excitement, the hearty thuds of blows, aimed with all sorts of weapons, just missing my head. The pistol was kicked out of my hand.

The horror of my position was very great. Must I kill the man? must I die myself in this miserable and senseless manner? I tried to shout, "Drag this maniac off me."

He was pinning my arms to my body. I saw the furious faces bending over me, the many hands murderously uplifted. They, of course, couldn't tell that I wasn't one of the men who had boarded them, and my life had never been in such jeopardy. I felt all the fury of rage and mortification. Was I to die like this, villainously trodden underfoot, on the threshold of safety, of liberty, of love? And, in those

moments of violent struggle I saw, as one sees in moments of wisdom and meditation, my soul--all life, lying under the shadow of a perfidious destiny. And Seraphina was there in the boat, waiting for me. The sea! The boat! They were in another land, and I, I should no more.... never any more.... A sharp voice called, "Back there, men. Steady. Take him alive." They dragged me up.

I needn't relate by what steps, from being terribly handled as a captive, I was promoted to having my arms shaken off in the character of a saviour. But I got any amount of praise at last, though I was terribly out of breath--at the very last gasp, as you might say. A man, smooth-faced, well-knit, very elated and buoyant, began talking to me endlessly. He was mighty happy, and anyhow he could talk to me, because I was past doing anything but taking a moment's rest. He said I had come in the nick of time, and was quite the best of fellows.

"If you had a fancy to be called the Archbishop of Canterbury, we'd 'your Grace' you. I am the mate, Sebright. The captain's gone in to show himself to the missus; she wouldn't like to have him too much chipped.... Wonderful is the love of woman. She sat up a bit later to-night with her fancy-sewing to see what might turn up. I told her at tea-time she had better go in early and shut her stateroom door, because if any of the Dagos chanced to come aboard, I couldn't be responsible for the language of my crowd. We are supposed to keep clear of profanity this trip, she being a niece of Mr. Perkins of Bristol, our owner, and a Methodist. But, hang it all, there's reason in all things. You can't have a ship like a chapel--though she would. Oh, bless you, she would, even when we're beating off these picaroons."

I was sitting on the afterhatch, and leaning my head on my arms.

"Feel bad? Do you? Handled you like a bag of shavings. Well, the boys got their monkey up, hammering the Dagos. Here you, Mike, go look along the deck, for a double-barrelled pistol. Move yourself a bit. Feel along under the spars."

There was something authoritative and knowing in his personality; boyishly elated and full of business.

"We must put the ship to rights. You don't think they'd come back for another taste? The blessed old deck's afloat. That's my little dodge, boiling water for these Dagos, if they come. So I got the cook to fire up, and we put the suction-hose of the fire pump into the boiler, and we filled the coppers and the kettles. Not a bad notion, eh? But ten times as much wouldn't have been enough, and the hose burst at the third stroke, so that only one boat got anything to speak of. But Lord, she dropped out of the ruck as if she'd been swept with langridge. Squealed like a litter of pigs, didn't they?"

What I had taken for blood had been the water from the burst hose. I must say I was relieved. My new friend babbled any amount of joyous information into me before I quite got my wind back. He rubbed his hands and clapped me on the shoulder. But his heart was kind, and he became concerned at my collapsed state.

"I say, you don't think my chaps broke some of your ribs, do you? Let me feel."

And then I managed to tell him something of Seraphina that he would listen to.

"What, what?" he said. "Oh, heavens and earth! there's your girl. Of course.... Hey, bo'sun, rig a whip and chair on the yardarm to take a lady on board. Bear a hand. A lady! yes, a lady. Confound it, don't lose your wits, man. Look over the starboard rail, and you will see a lady alongside with a Dago in a small boat. Let the Dago come on board, too; the gentleman here says he's a good sort. Now, do you understand?"

He talked to me a good deal more; told me that they had made a prisoner--"a tall, comical chap; wears his hair like an old aunt of mine, a bunch of curls flapping on each side of his face"--and then said that he must go and report to Captain Williams, who had gone into his wife's stateroom. The name struck me. I said:

"Is this ship the Lion?"

"Aye, aye. That's her. She is," several seamen answered together, casting curious glances from their work.

"Tell your captain my name is Kemp," I shouted after Sebright with what strength of lung I had.

What luck! Williams was the jolly little ship's captain I was to have dined with on the day of execution on Kingston Point--the day I had been kidnapped. It seemed ages ago. I wanted to get to the side to look after Seraphina, but I simply couldn't remember how to stand. I sat on the hatch, looking at the seamen.

They were clearing the ropes, collecting the lamps, picking up knives, handspikes, crowbars, swabbing the decks with squashy flaps. A bare-footed, bare-armed fellow, holding a bundle of brass-hilted cutlasses under his arm, had lost himself in the contemplation of my person.

"Where are you bound to?" I inquired at large, and everybody showed a friendly alacrity in answer.

"Havana." "Havana, sir." "Havana's our next port. Aye, Havana."

The deck rang with modulations of the name.

I heard a loud, "Alas," sighed out behind me. A distracted, stricken voice repeated twice in Spanish, "Oh, my greatness; oh, my greatness." Then, shiveringly, in a tone of profound self-communion, "I have a greatly parched throat," it said. Harshly jovial voices answered:

"Stow your lingo and come before the captain. Step along."

A prisoner, conducted aft, stalked reluctantly into the light between two short, bustling sailors. Dishevelled black hair like a damaged peruke, mournful, yellow face, enormous stag's eyes straining down on me. I recognized Manuel-del-Popolo. At the same moment he sprang back, shrieking, "This is a miracle of the devil--of the devil."

The sailors fell to tugging at his arms savagely, asking, "What's come to you?" and, after a short struggle that shook his tatters and his raven locks tempestuously like a gust of wind, he submitted to be walked up repeating:

"Is it you, Señor? Is it you? Is it you?"

One of his shoulders was bare from neck to elbow; at every step one of his knees and part of a lean thigh protruded their nakedness through a large rent; a strip of grimy, blood-stained linen, torn right down to the waist, dangled solemnly in front of his legs. There was a horrible raw patch amongst the roots of his hair just above his temple; there was blood in his nostrils, the stamp of excessive anguish on his features, a sort of guarded despair in his eye. His voice sank while he said again, twice:

"Is it you? Is it you?" And then, for the last time, "Is it you?" he repeated in a whisper.

The seamen formed a wide ring, and, looking at me, he talked to himself confidentially.

"Escaped--the Inglez! Then thou art doomed, Domingo. Domingo, thou art doomed. Dom... Señor!"

The change of tone, his effort to extend his hands towards me, surprised us all. I looked away.

"Hold hard! Hold him, mate!"

"Señor, condescend to behold my downfall. I am led here to the slaughter, Señor! To the slaughter, Señor! Pity! Grace! Mercy! And only a short while ago--behold. Slaughter... I... Manuel. Señor, I am universally admired--with a parched throat, Señor. I could compose a song that would make a priest weep.... A greatly parched throat, Señor," he added piteously.

I could not help turning my head. I had not been used half as hard as he. It was enough to look at him to believe in the dryness of his throat. Under the matted mass of his hair, he was grinning in amiable agony, and his globular eyes yearned upon me with a motionless and glassy lustre.

"You have not forgotten me, Señor? Forget Manuel! Impossible! Manuel, Señor. For the love of God. Manuel. Manuel-del-Popolo. I did sing, deign to remember. I offered you my fidelity, Señor. As you are a caballero, I charge you to remember. Save me, Señor. Speak to those men.... For the sake of your honour, Señor."

His voice was extraordinarily harsh--not his own. Apparently, he believed that he was going to be cut to pieces there and then by the sailors. He seemed to read it in their faces, shuddering and shrinking whenever he raised his eyes. But all these faces gaped with good-natured wonder, except the faces of his two guardians, and these expressed a state of conscientious worry. They were ridiculously anxious to suppress his sudden contortions, as one would some gross indecency. In the scuffle they hissed and swore under their breath. They were scandalized and made unhappy by his behaviour.

"Are you ready down there?" roared the bo'sun in the waist.

"Olla raight! Olla raight! Waita a leetle," I heard Castro's voice coming, as if from under the ship. I said coldly a few words about the certain punishment awaiting a pirate in Havana, and got on to my feet stiffly. But Manuel was too terrified to understand what I meant. He attempted to snatch at me with his imprisoned hands, and got for his pains a severe jerking, which made his head roll about his shoulders weirdly.

"Pity, Señor!" he screamed. And then, with low fervour, "Don't go away. Listen! I am profound. Perhaps the Señor did not know that? Mercy! I am a man of intrigue. A politico. You have escaped, and I rejoice at it."... He bared his fangs, and frothed like a mad dog.... "Señor, I am made happy because of the love I bore you from the first--and Domingo, who let you slip out of the Casa, is doomed. He is doomed. Thou art doomed, Domingo! But the excessive affection for your noble

person inspires my intellect with a salutary combination. Wait, Señor! A moment! An instant!... A combination!..."

He gasped as though his heart had burst. The seamen, open-mouthed, were slowly narrowing their circle.

"Can't he gabble!" remarked someone patiently.

His eyes were starting out of his head. He spoke with fearful rapidity.

"... There's no refuge from the anger of the Juez but the grave--the grave--the grave!... Ha! ha! Go into thy grave, Domingo. But you, Señor--listen to my supplications--where will you go? To Havana. The Juez is there, and I call the malediction of the priests on my head if you, too, are not doomed. Life! Liberty! Señor, let me go, and I shall run--I shall ride, Señor--I shall throw myself at the feet of the Juez, and say... I shall say I killed you. I am greatly trusted by the reason of my superior intelligence. I shall say, 'Domingo let him go--but he is dead. Think of him no more--of that Inglez who escaped--from Domingo. Do not look for him. I, your own Manuel, have killed him.' Give me my life for yours, Señor. I shall swear I had killed you with this right hand! Ah!"

He hung on my lips breathless, with a face so distorted that, though it might have been death alone he hated, he looked, indeed, as if impatient to set to and tear me to pieces with his long teeth. Men clutching at straws must have faces thus convulsed by an eager and despairing hope. His silence removed the spell--the spell of his incredible loquacity. I heard the boatswain's hoarse tones:

"Hold on well, ma'am. Right! Walk away steady with that whip!"

I ran limping forward.

"High enough," he rumbled; and I received Seraphina into my arms.