

CHAPTER SIX

How often the activity of our life is the least real part of it! Life, looked upon as a whole, presents itself to my fancy as a pursuit with open arms of a winged and magnificent dream, hovering just over our heads and casting its glory upon our hopes. It is in this simple vision, which is one and enduring, and not in the changing facts, that we must look for meaning and for truth. The three quiet days we spent together on board the *Lion* remain to me memorable and full of import, eventless and containing the very quintessence of existence. We shared the sunshine, always together, very close, turning hand in hand to the sea, whose unstained blueness continued under our feet the blue above our heads, as though we had been snatched up into the sky. The insignificant words we exchanged seemed informed by a sustaining certitude and an admirable gravity, as though there had been some quality of unerring wisdom in the blind love of man and woman. From the inexhaustible treasure of her feelings she drew words, glances, gestures that appeased every uneasiness of my heart. In some brief moment of illumination whose advent my man's eyes had utterly missed, she had learned all at once everything there was to know. She knew. She no longer needed to survey my actions, my words, my thoughts; but she accorded me the sincere flattery of spell-bound attention, and it was made intoxicating by her smile. In those short days of a pause, when, like a swimmer turning on his back, we lived in the trustful confidence of the sustaining depths, instead of struggling with the agitation of the surface--in these days we had the time to look at each other profoundly; and I saw her smile come back again a little changed, more meaning and a little less mirthful, as if her lips had been made stiff by sorrow. But she was young; and youth, the time of softness, of tenderness, of enthusiasm, and of pity, presents a surface as hard as marble to the finality of death.

Breathing side by side, drinking in the sunshine, and talking of ourselves not at all, but casting the sense of our love like a magnificent garment over the wide significance of a world already conquered, we could not help being made aware of the currents of excitement and sympathy that converged upon our essential isolation from the life of the ship. It was the excitement of the adventure brewing for our drinking according to Sebright's recipe. People approached us--spoke to us. We attended to them as if called down from an elevation; we were aware of the kind tone; and, remaining indistinct, they retreated, leaving us free to regain the heights of the lovers' paradise--a region of tender whispers and intense silences. Suddenly there would be a short, throaty laugh behind our backs, and Williams would begin, "I say, Kemp; do you call to mind so-and-so?" Invariably some planter or merchant in Jamaica. I never could.

Williams would grunt, "No? I wonder how you passed your time away these two years or more. The place isn't that big." His purpose was to cheer me up by some gossip, if only he could find a common acquaintance to talk over. I believe he thought me a queer fish. He told me once that everybody he knew in Jamaica had that precise opinion of me. Then with a chuckle and muttering, "Warrants--assault--Top--nambo--ha, ha!" he would leave us to ourselves, and continue his waddle up and down the poop. He wore loose silk trousers, and the round legs inside moved like a contrivance made out of two gate-posts.

He was absurd. They all were that before our sweet reasonableness. But this atmosphere, full of interest and good will, was good to breathe. The very steward--the same who had been hiding in the lazarette during the fight--a hunted creature, displaying the most insignificant anatomy ever inhabited by a quailing spirit, devoted himself to the manufacture of strange cakes, which at tea-time he would deposit smoking hot in front of Seraphina's place. After each such exploit, he appeared amazed at his audacity in taking so much upon himself. The carpenter took more than a day, tinkering at an old ship's boat. He was a Shetlander--a sort of shaggy hyperborean giant with a forbidding face, an appraising, contemplative manner, and many nails in his mouth. At last the time came when he, too, approached our oblivion from behind, with a large hammer in his hand; but instead of braining us with one sweep of his mighty arm, he remarked simply in uncouth accents, "There now; I am thinking she will do well for what ye want her. I can do no more for ye."

We turned round, arm-in-arm, to look at the boat. There she was, lying careened on the deck, with patched sides, in a belt of chips, shavings, and sawdust; a few pensive sailors stood about, gazing down at her with serious eyes. Sebright, bent double, circled slowly on a prowl of minute inspection. Suddenly straightening himself up, he pronounced a curt "She'll do"; and, without looking at us at all, went off busily with his rapid stride.

A light sigh floated down upon our heads. Williams and his wife appeared on the poop above us like an allegorical couple of repletion and starvation, conceived in a fantastic vein on a balcony. A cigar smouldered in his stumpy red fingers. She had slipped a hand under his arm, as she would always do the moment they came near each other. She never looked more wasted and old-maidish than when thus affirming her wifely rights. But her eyes were motherly.

"Ah, my dears!" (She usually addressed Seraphina as "miss," and myself as "young sir.") "Ah, my dears! It seems so heartless to be sending you off in such a small boat, even for your own good."

"Never fear, Mary. Repaired. Carry six comfortably," reassured Williams in a

tremendous mutter, like a bull.

"But why can't you give them one of the others, Owen? That big one there?"

"Nonsense, Mary. Never see boat again. Wouldn't grudge it. Only Sebright is quite right. Didn't you hear what Sebright said? Very sensible. Ask Sebright. He will explain to you again."

It was Sebright, with his asperity and his tact, with fits of brusqueness subdued by an almost affectionate contempt, who conducted all their affairs, as I have seen a trustworthy and experienced old nurse rule the infinite perplexities of a room full of children. His clear-sightedness and mental grip seemed independent of age and experience, like the ability of genius. He had an imaginative eye for detail, and, starting from a mere hint, would go scheming onwards with astonishing precision. His plan, to which we were committed--committed helplessly and without resistance--was based upon the necessity of our leaving the ship.

He had developed it to me that evening, in the cabin, directly Castro had gone out. He had already got Williams and his wife to share his view of our situation. He began by laying it down that in every desperate position there was a loophole for escape. Like other great men, he was conscious of his ability, and was inclined to theorize at large for a while. You had to accept the situation, go with it in a measure, and as you had walked into trouble with your eyes shut, you had only to continue with your eyes open. Time was the only thing that could defeat one. If you had no time, he admitted, you were at a dead wall. In this case he judged there would be time, because O'Brien, warned already, would sit tight for a few days, being sure to get hold of us directly the Lion came into port. It was only if the Lion failed to turn up within a reasonable term in Havana, that he would take fright, and take measures to hunt her up at sea. But I might rest assured that the Lion was going to Havana as fast as the winds would allow her.

What was, then, the situation? he continued, looking at me piercingly above Williams' cropped head. I had run away for dear life from Cuba (taking with me what was best in it, to be sure, he interjected, with a faint smile towards Seraphina). I had no money, no friends (except my friends in this cabin, he was good enough to say); warrants out against me in Jamaica; no means to get to England; no safety in the ship. It was no use shirking that little fact. We must leave the Lion. This was a hopeless enough position. But it was hopeless only because it was not looked upon in the right way. We assumed that we had to leave her forever, while the whole secret of the trick was in this, that we need only leave her for a time. After O'Brien's myrmidons had gone through her, and had been hooted away empty-handed, she became again, if not absolutely safe, then

at least possible--the only possible refuge for us--the only decent means of reaching England together, where, he understood, our trouble would cease. Williams nodded approval heavily.

"The friends of Miss Riego would be glad to know she had made the passage under the care of a respectable married lady," Sebright explained, in that imperturbable manner of his, which reflected faintly all his inner moods--whether of recklessness, of jocularly or anxiety--and often his underlying scorn. His gravity grew perfectly portentous. "Mrs. Williams," he continued, "was, of course, very anxious to do her part creditably. As it happened, the Lion was chartered for London this voyage; and notwithstanding her natural desire to rejoin, as soon as possible, her home and her aged uncle in Bristol, she intended to go with the young lady in a hackney coach to the very door."

I had previously told them that the lately appointed Spanish ambassador in London was a relation of the Riegos, and personally acquainted with Seraphina, who, nearly two years before, had been on a short visit to Spain, and had lived for some months with his family in Madrid, I believe. No trouble or difficulty was to be apprehended as to proper recognition, or in the matter of rights and inheritance, and so on. The ambassador would make that his own affair. And for the rest I trusted the decision of her character and the strength of her affection. I was not afraid she would let any one talk her out of an engagement, the dying wish of her nearest kinsman, sealed, as it were, with the blood of her father. This matter of temporary absence from the Lion, however, seemed to present an insuperable difficulty. We could not, obviously, be left for days floating in an open boat outside Havana harbour, waiting till the ship came out to pick us up. Sebright himself admitted that at first he did not see how it could be contrived. He didn't see at all. He thought and thought. It was enough to sicken one of every sort of thinking. Then, suddenly, the few words Castro had let drop about the sugar estate and the relay of mules came into his head--providentially, as Mrs. Williams would say. He fancied that the primitive and grandiose manner for a gentleman to keep a relay of mules--any amount of mules--in case he should want to send a letter or two, caused the circumstance to stick in his mind. At once he had "our little hidalgo" in, and put him through an examination.

"He turned fairly sulky, and tried constantly to break out against you, till Dona Seraphina here gave him a good talking to," Sebright said.

Otherwise it was most satisfactory. The place was accessible from the sea through a narrow inlet, opening into a small, perfectly sheltered basin at the back of the sand-dunes. The little river watering the estate emptied itself into that basin. One could land from a boat there, he understood, as if in a dock--and it was the very devil if I and Miss Riego could not lie hidden for a few days on her

own property, the more so that, as it came out in the course of the discussion, while I had "rushed out to look at the sunset," that the manager, or whatever they called him--the fellow in charge--was the husband of Dona Seraphina's old nurse-woman. Of course, it behoved us to make as little fuss as possible--try to reach the house along by-paths early in the morning, when all the slaves would be out at work in the fields. Castro, who professed to know the locality very well indeed, would be of use. Meantime, the Lion would make her way to Havana, as if nothing was the matter. No doubt all sorts of confounded alguazils and custom-house hounds would be ready to swarm on board in full cry. They would be made very welcome. Any strangers on board? Certainly not. Why should there be?... Rio Medio? What about Rio Medio? Hadn't been within miles and miles of Rio Medio; tried this trip to beat up well clear of the coast. Search the ship? With pleasure--every nook and cranny. He didn't suppose they would have the cheek to talk of the pirates; but if they did venture--what then? Pirates? That's very serious and dishonourable to the power of Spain. Personally, had seen nothing of pirates. Thought they had all been captured and hanged quite lately. Rumours of the Lion having been attacked obviously untrue. Some other ship, perhaps.... That was the line to take. If it didn't convince them, it would puzzle them altogether. Of course, Captain Williams, in his great regard for me, had abandoned the intention of making an affair of state of the outrage committed on his ship. He would not lodge any complaint in Havana--nothing at all. The old women of the Admiralty wouldn't be made to sit up this time. No report would be sent to the admiral either. Only, if the ship were interfered with, and bothered under any pretence whatever, once they had been given every facility to have one good look everywhere, the admiral would be asked to stop it. And the Spanish authorities would have not a leg to stand on either, for this simple reason, that they could not very well own to the sources of their information. Meantime, all hands on board the Lion had to be taken into confidence; that could not be avoided. He, Sebright, answered for their discretion while sober, anyhow; and he promised me that no leave or money would be given in Havana, for fear they should get on a spree, and let out something in the grogshops on shore. We all knew what a sailor-man was after a glass or two. So that was settled. Now, as to our rejoining the Lion. This, of necessity, must be left to me. Counting from the time we parted from her to land on the coast, the Lion would remain in Havana sixteen days; and if we did not turn up in that time, and the cargo was all on board by then, Captain Williams would try to remain in harbour on one pretence or another a few days longer. But sixteen days should be ample, and it was even better not to hurry up too much. To arrive on the fifteenth day would be the safest proceeding in a way, but for the cutting of the thing too fine, perhaps. With all these mules at our disposal, Sebright didn't see why we should not make our way by land, pass through the town at night, or in the earliest morning, and go straight on board the Lion--perhaps use some sort of disguise. He couldn't say. He was out of it there. Blackened faces or something. Anyway, we would be looked out for on

board night and day.

Later on, however, we had learned from Castro that the estate possessed a sailing craft of about twenty tons, which made frequent trips to Havana. These sugar droghers belonging to the plantations (every estate on the coast had one or more) went in and out of the harbour without being taken much notice of. Sometimes the battery at the water's edge on the north side or a custom-house guard would hail them, but not often--and even then only to ask the name, where from, and for the number of sugar-hogsheads on board. "By heavens! That's the very thing!" rejoiced Sebright. And it was agreed that this would be our best way. We should time our arrival for early morning, or else at dusk. The craft that brought us in should be made, by a piece of unskillful management, to fall aboard the Lion, and remain alongside long enough to give us time to sneak in through an open deck-port.

The whole occurrence must be so contrived as to wear the appearance of a pure accident to the onlookers, should there be any. Shouting and an exchange of abuse on both parts should sound very true. Then the drogher, getting herself clear, would proceed innocently to the custom-house steps, where all such coasters had to report themselves on arrival. "Never fear. We shall put in some loud and scandalous cursing," Sebright assured me. "The boys will greatly enjoy that part, I dare say."

Remained to consider the purpose of the schooner that had come out of Rio Medio to hang on our skirts. It was doubtful whether it was in our power to shake her off. Sebright was full of admiration for her sailing qualities, coupled with infinite contempt for the "lubberly gang on board."

"If I had the handling of her, now," he said, "I would take my position as near as I liked, and stick there. It seems almost as if she would do it of herself, if those imbeciles would only let her have her own way. I never yet saw a Spaniard, good or bad, that was anything of a sailor. As it is, we may maintain a distance that would make it difficult for them to see what we are about. And if not, then--why, you must take your leave of us at night."

He didn't know that, but for the dismalness of such a departure, it were not just as well. Who could tell what eyes might be watching on shore?

"You know I never pretended my plan was quite safe. But have you got another?"

I made no answer, because I had no other, and could not think of one. Incredible as it may appear, not only my heart, but my mind, also, in the awakened comprehension of my love, refused to grapple with difficulties. My thoughts raced

ahead of ships and pursuing men, into a dream of cloudless felicity without end. And I don't think Sebright expected any suggestion from me. This took place during one of our busy talks--only he and I--alone in his cabin. He had been washing his hands, making ready for tea.

"Do you know," he said, turning full on me, and wiping his fingers carefully with a coarse towel--"do you know, I shouldn't wonder if that schooner were not keeping watch on us, in suspicion of just some such move on our part. 'Tis extraordinary how clever the greatest fool may show himself sometimes. Only, with their lubberly Spanish seamanship, they would expect us, probably, to make a whole ceremony of your landing: ship hove to for hours close in shore, a boat going off to land and returning, and all such pother. 'We are sure to see their little show,' they think to themselves. Eh? What? Whereas we shall keep well clear of the land when the time comes, and drop you in the dark without as much check on our way as there is in the wink of an eye. Hey?... Mind, Mr. Kemp, you take the boat out of sight up that little river, in case they should have a fancy, as they go along after us, to peep into that inlet. As I have said it wouldn't do to trust too much in any fool's folly."

And now the time was approaching; the time to awake and step forth out of the temple of sunshine and love--of whispers and silences. It had come. The night before both Williams and Sebright had been on deck, working the ship with an anxious care to take the utmost advantage of every favouring flaw in the contrary breeze. In the morning I was told there was a norther brewing. A norther is a tempestuous gale. I saw no signs of it. The realm of the sun, like the vanished one of the stars, appeared to my senses to be profoundly asleep, and breathing as gently as a child upon the ship. The Lion, too, seemed to lie wrapped in an enchanted slumber from the water-line to the tops of her upright masts. And yet she moved with the breath of the world, but so imperceptibly that it was the coast that seemed to be nearing her like a line of low vapour blown along the water. Between Williams and Sebright Castro pointed with his one arm, and a splutter of guttural syllables fell like hail out of his lips. The other two seemed incredulous. He stamped with both his feet angrily. Finally they went below together, to look at the chart, I suppose. They came up again very fast, one after another, and stood in a row, looking on as before. Three more dissimilar human beings it would have been difficult to imagine.

Dazzling white patches, about the size of a man's hand, came out between sky and water. They grew in width, and ran together with a hummocky outline into a continuous undulation of sand-dunes. Here and there this rampart had a gap like a breach made by guns. Mrs. Williams, behind me, blew her nose faintly; her eyes were red, but she did not look at us. No eye was turned our way, and the spell of the coast was on her, too. A low, dark headland broke out to view through

the dunes, and stood there conspicuous amongst the heaps of dazzling sand, like a small man frowning. A voice on deck pronounced:

"That's right. Here's his landmark. The fellow knew very well what he was talking about."

It was Sebright's voice, and Castro, strolling away triumphantly, affected to turn his back on the land. He had recognized the formation of the coast about the inlet long before anybody else could distinguish the details. His word had been doubted. He was offended, and passed us by, wrapping himself up closely. One of Seraphina's locks blew against my cheek, and this last effort of the breeze remained snared in the silken meshes of her hair.

"There's not enough wind to fill the sail of a toy boat," grumbled Sebright; "and you can't pull this heavy gig ashore with only that one-armed man at the other oar." He was sorry he could not send us off with four good rowers. The norther might be coming on before they could return to the ship, and--apart from the presence of four English sailors on the coast being sure to get talked about--there was the difficulty in getting them back on board in Havana. We could, no doubt, smuggle ourselves in; but six people would make too much of a show. On the other hand, the absence of four men out of the ship's company could not be accounted for very well to the authorities. "We can't say they all died, and we threw them overboard. It would be too startling. No; you must go alone, and leave us at the first breath of wind; and that, I fear, 'll be the first of the norther, too."

He threw his head back, and hailed, "Do you see anything of that schooner from aloft there?"

"Nothing of her, sir," answered a man perched, with dangling feet, astride the very end of the topsail yard-arm. He paused, scanned the space from under the flat of his hand, and added, shouting with deliberation, "There's--a--haze--to seaward, sir." The ship, with her decks sprinkled over with men in twos and threes, sent up to his ears a murmur of satisfaction.

If we could not see her, she could not see us. This was a favourable circumstance. To the infinite gratification of everyone on board, it had been discovered at daylight that the schooner had lost touch with us during the hours of darkness--either through unskillful handling, or from some accidental disadvantage of the variable wind. I had been informed of it, directly I showed myself on deck in the morning, by several men who had radiant grins, as if some great piece of luck had befallen them, one and all. They shared their unflagging attention between the land and the sea-horizon, pointing out to each other, with their tattooed arms, the features of the coast, nodding knowingly towards the

open. At midday most of them brought out their dinners on deck, and could be seen forward, each with a tin plate in the left hand, gesticulating amicably with clasp knives. A small white handkerchief hung from Mrs. Williams' fingers, and now and then she touched her eyes lightly, one after the other. Her husband and Sebright, with a grave mien, stamped busily around the binnacle aft, changing places, making way for each other, stooping in turns to glance carefully along the compass card at the low bluff, like two gunners laying a piece of heavy ordnance for an important shot. The steward, emerging out of the companion, rang a handbell violently, and remained scared at the failure of that appeal. After waiting for a moment, he produced a further feeble tinkle, and sank down out of sight, with resignation.

A white sun, as if blazing with the pallor of fury, swung past the zenith in a profound and universal stillness. There was not a wrinkle on the sea; it presented a lustrous and glittering level, like the polished facet of a gem. In the cabin we sat down to the meal, not even pretending a desire to eat, exchanging vague phrases, hanging our heads over the empty plates. But the regular footsteps of the boatswain left in charge hesitated, stopped near the skylight. He said in an imperfectly assured voice, "Seems as if there was a steadier draught coming now." At this we rose from the table impetuously, as though he had shouted an alarm of fire, and Mrs. Williams, with a little cry, ran round to Seraphina. Leaving the two women locked in a silent embrace, the captain, Sebright and myself hurried out on deck.

Every man in the ship had done the same. Even the shiny black cook had come out of his galley, and was already comfortably seated on the rail, baring his white teeth to the sunshine.

"Just about enough to blow out a farthing dip," said Sebright, in a disappointed mutter.

He thought, however, we had better not wait for more. There would be too much presently. Some sailors hauled the boat alongside, the rest lined the rail as for a naval spectacle, and Williams stared blankly. We were waiting for Seraphina, who appeared, attended by Mrs. Williams, looking more kind, bloodless, and ascetic than ever. But my girl's cheeks glowed; her eyes sparkled audaciously. She had done up her hair in some way that made it fit her head like a cap. It became her exceedingly, and the decision of her movements, the white serenity of her brow, dazzled me as if I had never seen her before. She seemed less childlike, older, ripe for this adventure in a new development of strength and courage. She inclined her head slowly at the gaping sailors, who had taken their caps off.

As soon as she appeared, Castro, who had been leaning against the bulwark,

started up, and with a muttered "Adios, Señores," went down the overside ladder and ensconced himself in the bow of the boat. The leave-taking was hurried over. Williams gave no sign of feeling, except, perhaps, for the greater intensity of his stare, which passed beyond our shoulders in the very act of handshaking. Sebright helped Seraphina down into the boat, and ran up again nimbly. Mrs. Williams, with her slim hand held in both mine, uttered a few incoherent words--about men's promises and the happiness of women, as I thought; but, truth to say, my own suppressed excitement was too considerable for close attention. I only knew that I had given her my confidence, that complete and utter confidence which neither wisdom nor power alone, can command. And, suddenly, it occurred to me that the heiress of a splendid name and fortune, down in the boat there, had no better friend in the world than this woman, who had come to us out of the waste of the sea, opening her simple heart to our need, like a pious and naive hermit in a wilderness throwing open the door of his cell to strange wayfarers.

"Mrs. Williams," I stammered. "If we--if I--there's no saying what may happen to any of us. If she ever comes to you--if she ever is in want of help...."

"Yes, yes. Always, always--like my own daughter."

And the good woman broke down, as if, indeed, I were taking her own daughter away.

"Nonsense, Mary!" Williams advanced, muttering tremendously. "They are not going round the world. Dare say get ashore in time for supper."

He stared through her without expression, as if she had been thin air, but she seized his arm, of course, and he gave me, then, an amazingly rapid wink which, I suppose, meant that I should go....

"All right there?" asked Sebright from above, as soon as I had taken my seat in the stern sheets by the side of Seraphina. He was standing on the poop deck ready with a sign for letting go the end of our painter on deck; but before I could answer in the affirmative, Castro, ensconced forward under his hat, drew his ready blade across the rope, as it were a throat.

At once a narrow strip of water opened between the boat and the ship, and our long-prepared departure, hastened thus by half a second, seemed to strike everybody dumb with surprise, as if we had taken wings to ourselves to fly away. Hastily I grasped the tiller to give the boat a sheer, and heard a sort of loud gasp in the air above. A row of heads, posed on chins all along the rail, stared after us with unanimous fixity. Mrs. Williams averted her face on her husband's shoulder. Behind the couple, Sebright raised his cap gravely.

Our little sail filled to a breeze which was much too feeble to produce a perceptible effect on the ship, and we left behind us her towering form, as one recedes from a tall white spire on a plain. I laid the boat's head straight for the dwarf headland, marking the mouth of the inlet on the interminable range of sand-dunes. We drove on with a smart ripple, but before we felt sufficiently settled to exchange a few words the animated sound languished suddenly, paused altogether, and, with a renewed murmur under our feet seemed to lose itself below the glassy waters.