

CHAPTER SEVEN

The calm had returned. The sea, changing from the warm glitter of a gem, and attuned to the grays and blacks of space, resembled a monstrous cinder under a sky of ashes.

The sun had disappeared, smothered in these clouds that had formed themselves all at once and everywhere, like some swift corruption of the upper air. For the best part of the afternoon the ship and the boat remained lying at right angles, within half a mile of each other. What light was left in the world, cut off from the source of life, seemed to sicken with a strange decay. The long stretch of sands and the sails of the motionless vessel stood out lividly pale in universal gloom. And yet the state of the atmosphere was such that we could see clear-cut the very folds in the steep face of the dunes, and the figures of the people moving on the poop of the Lion. There was always somebody there that had the aspect of watching us. Then, with some excitement, we saw them on board haul up the mainsail and lower the gig.

The four oars beat the sombre water, rising and falling apparently in the same place. She was an interminable time coming on, but as she neared us I was surprised at her dashing speed. Sebright, who steered, laid her alongside smartly, and two of his men, clambering over without a word, lowered our lug at once.

"We came to reef your sail for you. You couldn't manage that very well with a one-armed crew," said the young mate quietly in the enormous stillness. In his opinion, we couldn't expect now any wind till the first squall came down. This flurry, as he called it, would send us in smoking, and he was sure it would help the ship, as well, into Havana, in about twenty-four hours. He didn't think that it would come very heavy at first; and, once landed, we need not care how hard it blew.

He tendered me over the gunwale a pocket-flask covered with leather, and with a screwed silver stopper in the shape of a cup. It was from the captain; full of prime rum. We were pretty sure to get wet. He thrust, also, into my hands a gray woollen shawl. Mrs. Williams thought my young lady might be glad of it at night. "The dear old woman has shut herself up inside their stateroom, and is praying for you now," he concluded. "Look alive, boys."

His men did not answer him, but at some words he addressed to Castro, the latter, in the bows and looking at the coast, growled with a surly impatience. He was perfectly sure of the entrance. Had been in and out several times. Yes. At

night, too. Sebright then turned to me. After all, it was not so difficult. The inlet bore due south from us, and the wind would come true from the north. Always did in these bursts. I had only to keep dead before it. "The clouds will light you in at the last," he added meaningfully, glancing upwards.

The two sailors, having finished reefing, hoisted, lowered, and hoisted again the yard to see that the gear ran clear, and without one look at us, stepped back into the gig, and sat down in their places. For a moment longer we lay together, touching sides. Sebright extended his hand from boat to boat.

"You are in God's care now, Kemp," he said, looking up at me, and with an unexpected depth of feeling in his tone. "Take no turn with the sheet on any account, and if you feel it coming too heavy, let fly and chance it. Did I tell you we have sighted the schooner from aloft? No? We can just make her out from the main-yard away astern under the land. That don't matter now.... Señorita, I kiss your hands." He liked to air his Spanish.... "Keep cool whatever happens. Dead before it--mind. And count on sixteen days from to-morrow. Well. No more. Give way, boys."

He never looked back. We watched the boat being hoisted and secured. Shortly afterwards, as we were observing the Lion shortening sail, the first of the rain descended between her and us like a lowered veil. For a time she remained mistily visible, dark and gaunt with her bared spars. The downpour redoubled; she disappeared; and our hearts were stirred to a faster beat.

The shower fell on us, around us, descending perpendicularly, with a steady force; and the thunder rolled far off, as if coming from under the sea. Sometimes the muffled rumbling stopped, and let us hear plainly the gentle hiss and the patter of the drops falling upon a vast expanse. Suddenly, mingled with a loud detonation right over our heads, a burst of light outlined under the bellying strip of our sail the pointed crown of Castro's hat, reposing on a heap of black clothing huddled in the bows. The darkness swallowed it all. I swung Seraphina in front of me, and made her sit low on the stern sheets beneath my feet. A lot of foam boiled up around the boat, and we had the sensation of having been sent flying from a catapult.

Everything was black--perfectly black. At intervals, headlong gusts of rain swept over our heads. I suppose I did keep sufficiently cool, but in every flash of lightning the wind, the sea, the clouds, the rain, and the boat appeared to rush together thundering upon the coast. The line of sands, bordered with a belt of foam, zigzagged dazzlingly upon an earth as black as the clouds; only the headland, with every vision, remained sombre and unmoved. At last it rose up right before the boat. Blue lightning streamed on a lane of tumbling waters at its

foot. Was this the entrance? With the vague notion of shortening sail, I let the sheet go from my hand. There was a jerk, the crack of snapped wood, and the next flash showed me Castro emerging from the ruins of mast and sail. He uprose, hurling the wreck from him overboard, then flickered out of sight with his arm waving to the left, and I bore accordingly on the tiller. In a moment I saw him again, erect forward, with the arm pointing to the right, and I obeyed his signal. The clouds, straining with water and fire, were, indeed, lighting us on our way. A wave swelled astern, chasing us in; rocking frightfully, we glanced past a stationary mass of foam--a sandbar--breakers.... It was terrible.... Suddenly, the motion of the boat changed, and the flickers of lightning fell into a small, land-locked basin. The wind tore deep furrows in it, howling and scuffling behind the dunes. Spray flew from the whole surface, the entire pool of a bay seemed to heave bodily upwards, and I saw Castro again, with his face to me this time. His black cloak was blowing straight out from his throat, his mouth yawned wide; he shouted directions, but in an instant darkness sealed my eyes with its impenetrable impress. It was impossible to steer now; the boat swung and reeled where she listed; a violent shock threw me sideways off my seat. I felt her turning over, and, gathering Seraphina in my arms, I leaped out before she capsized. I leaped clear out into shallow water.

I should never in my life have thought myself capable of such a feat, and yet I did it with assurance, with no effort that I can remember. More than that--I managed, after the leap, to keep my feet in the clinging, staggering clutch of water charged with sand, which swirled heavily about my knees. It kept on hurling itself at my legs from behind, while I waded across the narrow strip of sand with an inspired firmness of step defying all the power of the elements. I felt the harder ground at last, but not before I had caught a momentary glimpse of a black and bulky object tumbling over and over in the advancing and withdrawing liquid flurry of the beach.

"Sit still here on the ground," I shouted to Seraphina, though flights of spray enveloped us completely. "I am going back for Castro."

I faced about, putting my head down. He had been undoubtedly knocked over; and an old man, with only one hand to help himself with, ran a very serious risk of being buffeted into insensibility, and thus coming to his death in some four feet of water. The violent glare disclosed a body, entangled in a cloak, rolling about helplessly between land and water, as it were. I dashed on in the dark; a wave went over my head as I stooped, nearly waist-deep, groping. His rotary motion, in that smother, made it extremely difficult to obtain any sort of hold. A little more, and he would have knocked my legs from under me, but it was as if my grim determination were by itself of a saving nature. He submitted to being hauled up the beach, passively, like a sack. It was a heavy drag on the sand; I felt him bump

behind me on the edge of the harder ground, and a deluge fell uninterruptedly from above. He lay prone on his face, like a corpse, between Seraphina and myself. We could not remain there, however.

But where to go? What to do? In what direction to look for a refuge? Was there any shelter near by? How were we to reach it? How were we to move at all? No doubt he had expired; and the earth, swept, deluged, glimmering fiercely and devastated with an awful uproar, appeared no longer habitable. A thunder-clap seemed to crash new life into him; the world flared all round, as if turning to a spark, and he was seen sitting up dazedly, like one called up from the dead. Through it all he had preserved his hat.

It was fixed firmly down under his chin with a handkerchief, the side rims over his ears like flaps, and, for the rest, presenting the appearance of a coal-scuttle bonnet behind, as well as in front. We followed its peculiar aspect. Driving on under this indestructible headgear, he flickered in and out of the world, while, with entwined arms and leaning back against the wind with all our might, Seraphina and myself were borne along in his train. He knew of a shelter; and this knowledge, perhaps, and also his evident familiarity with the topography of the country, made him appear indomitably confident in the storm.

A small plain of coarse grass was bounded by the steep spur of a rise. To the left a little river would burst, all at once, in all its windings into a bluish sulphurous glow; and between the crashes of thunder there was heard the long-drawn, whistling swish of the rushes and cane-brakes springing on the boggy ground. We skirted the rise. The rain beat against it; the lightning showed its streaming and furrowed surface. We stumbled in the gusts. We felt under our feet, mud, sand, rocky inequalities of the ground, and the moving stones in the bed of a torrent, which broke headlong against our ankles. The entrance of a deep ravine opened.

Its lower sides palpitated with the ceaseless tossing of dwarf trees and bushes; and, motionless above the sombre tumult of the slopes, the monumental stretch of bare rock rose on high, level at the top, and emitting a ghastly yellow sheen in the flashes. The thunderclaps rolled ponderously between the narrowing walls of that chasm, that was all aflame one moment, and all black the next. A torrent springing at its head, and dashing with inaudible fury along the bottom, seemed to gleam placidly amongst the rounded forms of inky bushes and pale boulders below our path. Enormous eddies of wind from above made us stop short and totter breathless, clinging to each other.

Castro sustained Seraphina on the other side; but frequently he had to leave us and move ahead, looking for the way. There was, in fact, a half-obliterated path winding along the less steep of the two sides; and we struggled after our guide

with the unthinking fortitude of despair. He was being disclosed to us so suddenly, extinguished so swiftly, that he appeared, always, as if motionless and posturing in a variety of climbing attitudes. The rise of the bottom was very steep, and the last hundred yards really stiff. We did them practically on our hands and knees. The dislodged stones bounded away from under our feet, unheard, like puff-balls.

At the top I tried to make of my body a shelter for Seraphina. The wind howled and roared over us. "Up! Vamos! The worst is yet before us," shrieked Castro in my ear.

What could he mean by this? The play of lightning opened to view only a vast and rolling upland. Fire flowed in sheets undulating with the expanses of long grass amongst the trees, here and there, in coal-black clumps, and flashed violently against a low edge of forests very dark and far away.

"Let us go!" he cried. "Courage, Señorita!"

Courage! The populace said of her that she had never needed to put her foot to the ground. If courage consists, for a being so tender, in toiling and enduring without faltering and plaint,--even to the very limit of physical power,--then she was the most courageous woman in the world, as she was the most charming, most faithful, most generous, and the most worthy of love. I tried not to think of her racked limbs, for the very pain and pity of it. We retraced our steps, but now following the edge of that precipice out of which we had emerged. I had peremptorily insisted on carrying her. She put her arms round my neck and, to my uplifted heart, she weighed no heavier than a feather. Castro, grasping my arm, guided my steps and gave me support against the wind.

There was a distinct lull. Even the thunder had rolled away, dwindling to a deep mutter. Castro fell on his knees in front of me.

"It is here," I heard him scream.

I set Seraphina down. A hooked dart of fire tore in two the thick canopy of clouds. I started back from the edge.

"What! Here?" I yelled.

"Señor--Si! There is a cavern below...."

I had seen a ledge clinging to the face of the rock.

It was a cornice inclining downwards upon the wall of the precipice, as you see, sometimes, a flight of stairs built against the outside wall of a house. And it resembled a stair roughly, with long, sloping steps, wet with rain.

"Por Dios, Señor, do not let us stay to think here, or we shall perish in this tempest."

He howled, gesticulated, shrieked with all the strength of his lungs. He knew these tornadoes. Brute beasts would be found lying dead in the fields in the morning. This was the beginning only. The lightning showed his kneeling form, the eager upturned face, and a finger pointing urgently into the abyss. The wind was nothing! Nothing to what would come after. As he shrieked these words I was feeling the crust of the earth vibrate, absolutely vibrate, under the soles of my feet, with the sound of thunder.

He unfastened his cloak, and was seen to struggle above his head with the hovering and flapping cloth, as though he had captured a black and pugnacious bird. We mastered at last a corner each, and then we started to twist the whole, as if to wring the water out. We produced, thus, a sort of short rope, the thickness of a cable, and the descent began.

"Do not look behind you. Do not look," Castro screeched.

The first downward steps were terrible, but as soon as our heads had sunk below the level of the plain it was better, for we had turned about to the rock, moving sideways, cautiously, one step at a time, as if inspecting its fractured roughness for traces of a mysterious inscription. Castro, with one end of the twisted cloak in his hand, went first; I held the other; and between us, Seraphina, the rope at her back, imitated our movements, with her loosened hair flying high in the wind, and her pale, rigid head as if deaf to the crashes. I saw the drawn stillness of her face, her dilated eyes staring within three inches of the strata. The strain on our prudence was tremendous. The knowledge of the precipice behind must have affected me. Explain it as you will, several times during that descent I felt my brain slip away from my control, and suggest a desire to fling myself over backwards. The twigs of the bushes, growing a little below the outer edge of the path, swished at my calves. Castro stopped. The cornice ended as a broken stairway hangs upon nothing. A tall, narrow arch stood back in the rock, with a sill three feet high at least. Castro clambered over; his head and torso, when he turned about, were lighted up blindingly between the inner walls at every flash. Seeing me lay hold of Seraphina, he yelled:

"Señor, mind! It's death if you stagger back."

I lifted her up, and put her over like a child; and, no sooner in myself, felt my strength leave all my limbs as water runs out of an overturned vessel. I could not have lifted up a child's doll then. Directly, with a wild little laugh, she said to me:

"Juan--I shall never dare come out."

I hugged her silently to my breast.

Castro went ahead. It was a narrow passage; our elbows touched the sides all the way. He struck at his flint regularly, sparks streamed down from his hand; we felt a freshness, a sense of space, as though we had come into another world. His voice directed us to turn to the left, then cried in the dark, "Stand still." A blue gleam darted after us, and retired without having done anything against the tenebrous body of gloom, and the thunder rolled far in, unobstructed, in leisurely, organ-like peals, as if through an amazingly vast emptiness of a temple. But where was Castro? We heard snappings, rustlings, mutters; sparks streamed, now here, now there. We dared not move. There might have been steep ridges--deep holes in that cavern. And suddenly we discovered him on all-fours, puffing out his cheeks above a small flame kindled in a heap of dry sticks and leaves.

It was an abode of darkness, enormous, without sonority. Feeble currents of air, passing on our faces, gave us a feeling of being in the open air on a night more black than any known night had been before. One's voice lost itself in there without resonance, as if on a plain; the smoke of our blaze drove aslant, scintillating with red sparks, and went trailing afar, as if under the clouds of a starless sky. Ultimately, it must have escaped through some imperceptible crevices in the roof of rock. In one place, only, the light of the fire illuminated a small part of the rugged wall, where the shadows of our bodies would surge up, repeating our movements, and suddenly be gone from our sight. Everywhere else, pressing upon the reflection of the flames, the blind darkness of the vault might have extended away for miles and miles.

Castro thought it probable. He made me observe the incline of the floor. It sloped down deep and far. For miles, no doubt. Nobody could tell; no one had seen the end of it. This cavern had been known of old. This brushwood, these dead leaves, that would make a couch for her Excellency, had been stored for years--perhaps by men who had died long ago. Look at the dry rot. These large piles of branches were found stacked up when he first beheld this place. Caramba! What toil! What fatigue! Let us thank the saints, however.

Nevertheless, he shook his head at the strangeness of it. His cloak, spread out wide, was drying in the light, while he busied himself with his hat, turning it

before the blaze in both hands, tenderly; and his tight little figure, lit up in front from head to foot, steamed from every limb. His round, plump shoulders and gray-shock head smoked quietly at the top. Suddenly, the fine mesh of wrinkles on his face ran together, shrinking like a torn cobweb; a spasmodic sound, quite new to me, was heard. He had laughed.

The warmth of the fire had penetrated our chilled bodies with a feeling of comfort and repose. Williams' flask was empty; and this was a new Castro, mellowed, discursive, almost genial. It was obvious to me that, had it not been for him, we two, lost and wandering in the storm, should have died from exposure and exhaustion--from some accident, perhaps. On the other hand I had indubitably saved his life, and he had already thanked me in high-flown language; very grave, but exaggerating the horrors of his danger, as a woman might have done for the better expression of gratitude. He had been greatly shocked. Spaniards, as a race, have never, for all their conquests, been on intimate terms with the sea. As individuals I have often observed in them, especially in the lower classes, a sort of dread, a dislike of salt water, mingled with contempt and fear.

Castro, lifting up his right arm, protested that I had given a proof of very noble devotion in rushing back for an old man into that black water. Ough! He shuddered. He had given himself up--por Dios! He hinted that, at his age, he could not have cared much for life; but then, drowning in the sea was a death abhorrent to an old Christian. You died brutally--without absolution, and unable, even, to think of your sins. He had had his mouth filled with horrid, bitter sand, too. Tfui! He gave me a thousand thanks. But these English were wonderful in their way.... Ah! Caramba! They were....

A large protuberance of the rocky floor had been roughly chipped into the semblance of a seat, God only knows by what hands and in what forgotten age. Seraphina's inclined pose, her torn dress, the wet tresses lying over her shoulders, her homeless aspect, made me think of a beautiful and miserable gipsy girl drying her hair before a fire. A little foot advanced, gleamed white on the instep in front of the ruddy glare; her clasped fingers nursed one raised knee; and, shivering no longer, her head drooping in still profile, she listened to us, frowning thoughtfully upon the flames.

In the guise of a beggar-maid, and fair, like a fugitive princess of romance, she sat concealed in the very heart of her dominions. This cavern belonged to her, as Castro remarked, and the bay of the sea, and the earth above our heads, the rolling upland, herds of cattle, fields of sugar-cane--even as far as the forest away there; the forest itself, too. And there were on that estate, alone, over two hundred Africans, he was able to tell us. He boasted of the wealth of the Riegos. Her Excellency, probably, did not know such details. Two hundred--certainly. The

estate of Don Vincente Salazar was on the other side of the river. Don Vincente was at present suffering the indignity of a prison for a small matter of a quarrel with another caballero--who had died lately--and all, he understood, through the intrigues of the prior of a certain convent; the uncle, they said, of the dead caballero. Bah! There was something to get. These fat friars were like the lean wolves of Russia--hungry for everything they could see. Never enough, Cuerpo de Dios! Never enough! Like their good friend who helped them in their iniquities, the Juez O'Brien, who had been getting rich for years on the sublime generosity of her Excellency's blessed father. In the greatness of his nobility, Don Balthasar of holy memory had every right to be obstinate.... Basta! He would speak no more; only there is a saying in Castile that fools and obstinate people make lawyers rich....

"Vuestra Señoria," he cried, checking himself, slapping his breast penitently, "deign to forgive me. I have been greatly exalted by the familiarity of the two last men of your house--allowed to speak freely because of my fidelity.... Alas! Alas!"

Seraphina, on the other side of the fire, made a vague gesture, and took her chin in her hand without looking at him.

"Patience," he mumbled to himself very audibly. "He is rich, this picaro, O'Brien. But there is, also, a proverb--that no riches shall avail in the day of vengeance."

Noticing that we had begun to whisper together, he threw himself before the fire, and was silent.

"Promise me one thing, Juan," murmured Seraphina.

I was kneeling by the side of her seat.

"By all that's holy," I cried, "I shall force him to come out and fight fair--and kill him as an English gentleman may."

"Not that! Not that!" she interrupted me. She did not mean me to do that. It was what she feared. It would be delivering myself into that man's hands. Did I think what that meant? It would be delivering her, too, into that man's power. She would not survive it. And if I desired her to live on, I must keep out of O'Brien's clutches.

"In my thoughts I have bound my life to yours, Juan, so fast that the stroke which cuts yours, cuts mine, too. No death can separate us."

"No," I said.

And she took my head in her hands, and looked into my eyes.

"No more mourning," she whispered rapidly. "No more. I am too young to have a lover's grave in my life--and too proud to submit...."

"Never," I protested ardently. "That couldn't be."

"Therefore look to it, Juan, that you do not sacrifice your life which is mine, either to your love--or--or--to revenge." She bowed her head; the falling hair concealed her face. "For it would be in vain."

"The cloak is perfectly dry now, Señorita," said Castro, reclining on his elbow on the edge of the darkness.

We two stepped out towards the entrance, leaving her on her knees, in silent prayer, with her hands clasped on her forehead, and leaning against the rugged wall of rock. Outside, the earth, enveloped in fire and uproar, seemed to have been given over to the fury of a devil.

Yes. She was right. O'Brien was a formidable and deadly enemy. I wished ourselves on board the Lion chaperoned by Mrs. Williams, and in the middle of the Atlantic. Nothing could make us really safe from his hatred but the vastness of the ocean. Meantime we had a shelter, for that night, at least, in this cavern that seemed big enough to contain, in its black gloom of a burial vault, all the dust and passions and hates of a nation....

Afterwards Castro and I sat murmuring by the diminished fire. He had much to say about the history of this cave. There was a tradition that the ancient buccaneers had held their revels in it. The stone on which the señorita had been sitting was supposed to have been the throne of their chief. A ferocious band they were, without the fear of God or devil--mostly English. The Rio Medio picaroons had used this cavern, occasionally, up to a year or so ago. But there were always ugly affairs with the people on the estate--the vaqueros. In his younger days Don Balthasar, having whole leagues of grass land here, had introduced a herd of cattle; then, as the Africans are useless for that work, he had ordered some peons from Mexico to be brought over with their families--ignorant men, who hardly knew how to make the sign of the cross. The quarrels had been about the cattle, which the Lugareños killed for meat. The peons rode over them, and there were many wounds on both sides. Then, the last time a Rio Medio schooner was lying here (after looting a ship outside), there was some gambling going on (they played round this very stone), and Manuel--(Si, Señor, this same Manuel the singer--Bestia!--in a dispute over the stakes, killed a peon, striking him unexpectedly

with a knife in the throat. No vengeance was taken for this, because the Lugareños sailed away at once; but the widow made a great noise, and some rumours came to the ears of Don Balthasar himself--for he, Castro, had been honoured with a mission to visit the estate. That was even the first occasion of Manuel's hate for him--Castro. And, as usual, the Intendente after all settled the matter as he liked, and nothing was done to Manuel. Don Balthasar was old, and, besides, too great a noble to be troubled with the doings of such vermin.... And Castro began to yawn.

At daybreak--he explained--he would start for the hacienda early, and return with mules for Seraphina and myself. The buildings of the estate were nearly three leagues away. All this tract of the country on the side of the sea was very deserted, the sugar-cane fields worked by the slaves lying inland, beyond the habitations. Here, near the coast, there were only the herds of cattle ranging the savannas and the peons looking after them, but even they sometimes did not come in sight of the sea for weeks together. He had no fear of being seen by anybody on his journey; we, also, could start without fear in daylight, as soon as he brought the mules. For the rest, he would make proper arrangements for secrecy with the husband of Seraphina's nurse--Enrico, he called him: a silent Galician; a graybeard worthy of confidence.

One of his first cares had been to grub out of his soaked clothes a handful of tobacco, and now he turned over the little drying heap critically. He hunted up a fragment of maize leaf somewhere upon his bosom. His face brightened. "Bueno," he muttered, very pleased.

"Señor--good-night," he said, more humanized than I had supposed possible; or was it only that I was getting to know him better? "And thanks. There's that in life which even an old tired man.... Here I, Castro... old and sad, Señor. Yes, Señor--nothing of mine in all the world--and yet.... But what a death! Ouch! the brute water... Caramba! Altogether improper for a man who has escaped from a great many battles and the winter of Russia.... The snow, Señor...."

He drowsed, garrulous, with the blackened end of his cigarette hanging from his lower lip, swayed sideways--and let himself go over gently, pillowing his head on the stump of his arm. The thin, viperish blade, stuck upwards from under his temple, gleamed red before the sinking fire.

I raised a handful of flaring twigs to look at Sera-phina. A terrible night raged over the land; the inner arch of the opening growled, winking bluishly time after time, and, like an enchanted princess enveloped in a beggar's cloak, she was lying profoundly asleep in the heart of her dominions.