

CHAPTER EIGHT

The first thing I noted, on opening my eyes, was that Castro had gone already; I was annoyed. He might have called me. However, we had arranged everything the evening before. The broad day, penetrating through the passage, diffused a semicircle of twilight over the flooring. It extended as far as the emplacement of the fire, black and cold now with a gray heap of ashes in the middle. Farther away in the darkness, beyond the reach of light, Seraphina on her bed of leaves did not stir. But what was that hat doing there? Castro's hat. It asserted its existence more than it ever did on the head of its master; black and rusty, like a battered cone of iron, reposing on a wide flange near the ashes. Then he was not gone. He would not start to walk three leagues, bare-headed. He would appear presently; and I waited, vexed at the loss of time. But he did not appear. "Castro," I cried in an undertone. The leaves rustled; Seraphina sat up.

We were pleased to be with each other in an inexpugnable retreat, to hear our voices untinged by anxiety; and, going to the outer end of the short passage, we breathed with joy the pure air. The tops of the bushes below glittered with drops of rain, the sky was clear, and the sun, to us invisible, struck full upon the face of the rock on the other side of the ravine. A great bird soared, all was light and silence, and we forgot Castro for a time. I threw my legs over the sill, and sitting on the stone surveyed the cornice. The bright day robbed the ravine of half its horrors. The path was rather broad, though there was a frightful sheer drop of ninety feet at least. Two men could have walked abreast on that ledge, and with a hand-rail one would have thought nothing of it. The most dangerous part yet was at the entrance, where it ended in a rounded projection not quite so wide as the rest. I bantered Seraphina as to going out. She said she was ready. She would shut her eyes, and take hold of my hand. Englishmen, she had heard, were good at climbing. Their heads were steady. Then we became silent. There were no signs of Castro. Where could he have gone? What could he be doing? It was unimaginable.

I grew nervous with anxiety at last, and begged Seraphina to go in. She obeyed without a word, and I remained just within the entrance, watching. I had no means to tell the time, but it seemed to me that an hour or two passed. Hadn't we better, I thought, start at once on foot for the hacienda? I did not know the way, but by descending the ravine again to the sea, and walking along the bank of the little river, I was sure to reach it. The objection to this was that we should miss Castro. Hang Castro! And yet there was something mysterious and threatening in his absence. Could he--could he have stepped out for some reason in the dark,

perhaps, and tumbled off the cornice? I had seen no traces of a slip--there would be none on the rock; the twigs of the growth below the edge would spring back, of course. But why should he fall? The footing was good--however, a sudden attack of vertigo.... I tried to look at it from every side. He was not a somnambulist, as far as I knew. And there was nothing to eat--I felt hungry already--or drink. The want of water would drive us out very soon to the spring bubbling out at the head of the ravine, a mile in the open. Then why not go at once, drink, and return to our lair as quickly as possible?

But I did not like to think of her going up and down the cornice. I remembered that we had a flask, and went in hastily to look for it. First, I looked near the hat; then, Seraphina and I, bent double with our eyes on the ground examined every square inch of twilight; we even wandered a long way into the darkness, feeling about with our hands. It was useless! I called out to her, and then we desisted, and coming together, wondered what might have become of the thing. He had taken it--that was clear.

But if, as one might suppose, he had taken it away to get some water for us, he ought to have been back long before. I was beginning to feel rather alarmed, and I tried to consider what we had better do. It was necessary to learn, first, what had become of him. Staring out of the opening, in my perplexity, I saw, on the other side of the ravine, the lower part of a man from his waist to his feet.

By crouching down at once, I brought his head into view. This was not Castro. He wore a black sombrero, and on his shoulder carried a gun. He turned his back on the ravine, and began to walk straight away, sinking from my sight till only his hat and shoulders remained visible. He lifted his arm then--straight up--evidently as a signal, and waited. Presently another head and shoulders joined him, and they glided across my line of sight together. But I had recognized their bandit-like aspect with infinite consternation. Lu-garenos!

I caught Seraphina's hand. My first thought was that we should have to steal out of the cavern with the first coming of darkness. Castro must be lying low in hiding somewhere above. The thing was plain. We must try to make our way to the hacienda under the cover of the night, unseen by those two men. Evidently they were emissaries sent from Rio Medio to watch this part of the coast against our possible landing. I was to be hunted down, it seems: and I reproached myself bitterly with the hardships I was bringing upon her continually. Thinking of the fatigues she had undergone--(I did not think of dangers--that was another thing--the romance of dying together like all the lovers in the tradition of the world)--I shook with rage and exasperation. The firm pressure of her hands calmed me. She was content. But what if they took it into their heads to come into the cavern?

The emptiness of the blue sky above the sheer yellow rock opposite was frightful. It was a mere strip, stretched like a luminous bandage over our eyes. They were, perhaps, even now on their way round the head of the ravine. I had no weapon except the butt of my pistol. The charges had been spoilt by the salt water, of course, and I had been tempted to fling it out of my belt, but for the thought of obtaining some powder somewhere. And those men I had seen were armed. At once we abandoned the neighbourhood of the entrance, plunging straight away into the profound obscurity of the cave. The rocky ground under our feet had a gentle slope, then dipped so sharply as to surprise us; and the entrance, diminishing at our backs, shone at last no larger than the entrance of a mouse-hole. We made a few steps more, gropingly. The bead of light disappeared altogether when we sat down, and we remained there hand-in-hand and silent, like two frightened children placed at the centre of the earth. There was not a sound, not a gleam. Sera-phina bore the crushing strain of this perfect and black stillness in an almost heroic immobility; but, as to me, it seemed to lie upon my limbs, to embarrass my breathing like a numbness full of dread; and to shake that feeling off I jumped up repeatedly to look at that luminous bead, that point of light no bigger than a pearl in the infinity of darkness. And once, just as I was looking, it shut and opened at me slowly, like the deliberate drooping and rising of the lid upon a white eyeball.

Somebody had come in.

We watched side by side. Only one. Would he go out? The point of light, like a white star setting in a coal-black firmament, remained uneclipsed. Whoever had entered was in no haste to leave. Moreover, we had no means of telling what another obscuring of the light might mean; a departure or another arrival. There were two men about, as we knew; and it was even possible that they had entered together in one wink of the light, treading close upon each other's heels. We both felt the sudden great desire to know for certain. But, especially, we needed to find out if perchance this was not Castro who had returned. We could not afford to lose his assistance. And should he conclude, we were out--should he risk himself outside again, in order to find us and be discovered himself, and thus lost to us when we felt him so necessary? And the doubt came. If this man was Castro, why didn't he penetrate further, and shout our names? He ought to have been intelligent enough to guess.... And it was this doubt that, making suspense intolerable, put us in motion.

We circled widely in that subterranean darkness, which, unlike the darkest night on the surface of the earth, had no suggestion of shape, no horizon, and seemed to have no more limit than the darkness of infinite space. On this floor of solid rock we moved with noiseless steps, like a pair of timid phantoms. The spot of

light grew in size, developed a shape--stretching from a pearly bead to a silvery thread; and, approaching from the side, we scanned from afar the circumscribed region of twilight about the opening. There was a man in it. We contemplated for a time his rounded back, his drooping head. It was gray. The man was Castro. He sat rocking himself sorrowfully over the ashes. He was mourning for us. We were touched by this silent faithfulness of grief.

He started when I put my hand on his shoulder, looked up, then, instead of giving any signs of joy, dropped his head again.

"You managed to avoid them, Castro?" I said.

"Señor, behold. Here I am. I, Castro."

His tone was gloomy, and after sitting still for a while under our gaze, he slapped his forehead violently. He was in his tantrums, I judged, and, as usual, angry with me--the cause of every misfortune. He was upset and annoyed beyond reason, as I thought, by this new difficulty. It meant delay--a certain measure of that sort of danger of which we had thought ourselves free for a time--night travelling for Seraphina. But I had an idea to save her this. We did not all want to go. Castro could start, alone, for the hacienda after dark, and bring, besides the mules, half a dozen peons with him for an escort. There was nothing really to get so upset about. The danger would have been if he had let himself be caught. But he had not. As to his temper, I knew my man; he had been amiable too long. But by this time we were so sure of his truculent devotion that Seraphina spoke gently to him, saying how anxious we had been--how glad we were to see him safe with us.... He would not be conciliated easily, it seemed, and let out only a blood-curdling dismal groan. Without looking at her, he tried hastily to make a cigarette. He was very clever at it generally, rolling it with one hand on his knee somehow; but this time all his limbs seemed to shake, he lost several pinches of tobacco, dropped the piece of maize leaf. Seraphina, stooping over his shoulder, took it up, twisted the thing swiftly. "Take, amigo," she said.

He was looking up at her, as if struck dumb, roiling his eye wildly. He jumped up.

"You--Señorita! For a miserable old man! You break my heart."

And with long strides he disappeared in the darkness, leaving us wondering.

We sat side by side on the couch of leaves. With Castro there I felt we were quite equal to dealing with the two Lugareños if they had the unlucky idea of intruding upon us. Indeed, a vigilant man, posted on one side of the end of the passage, could have disputed the entrance against ten, twenty, almost any number, as

long as he kept his strength and had something heavy enough to knock them over. Faint sounds reached me, as if at a great distance Castro had been shouting to himself. I called to him. He did not answer, but unexpectedly his short person showed itself in the brightest part of the light.

"Señor!" he called out with a strange intonation. I got up and went to him. He seemed to be listening intently with his ear turned to the opening. Then suddenly:

"Look at me, Señor. Am I Castro--the same Castro? old and friendless?"

He stood biting his forefinger and looking up at me from under his knitted eyebrows. I didn't know what to say. What was this nonsense?

He ejaculated a sort of incomprehensible babble, and, passing by me, rushed towards Seraphina; she sat up, startled, on her couch of leaves. Falling before her on his plump knees, he seized her hand, pressed it against his ragged moustache.

"Excellency, forgive me! No--no forgiveness! Ha! old man! Ha--thou old man...."

He bowed before her shadowy figure, that sustained the pale oval of the face, till his forehead struck the rock. Plunging his hand into the ashes, he poured a fistful with inarticulate low cries over his gray hairs; and the agitation of that obese little body on its knees had a lamentable and grotesque inconsequence, as inexplicable in itself as the sorrow of a madman. Full of wonder before his abject collapse, she murmured:

"What have you done?"

He tried to fling himself upon her feet, but my hand was in his collar, and after an unmerciful shaking, I sat him down by main force. He gulped, blinked the whites of his eyes, then, in a whisper full of rage:

"Horror, shame, misery, and malediction; I have betrayed you."

At once she said soothingly, "Tomasr I do not believe this"; while I thought to myself: How? Why? For what reason? In what manner betrayed? How was it possible? And, if so, why did he come back to us? But, as things stood, he would never dare approach a Lugareño. If he had, they would never have let him go again.

"You told them we were here?" I asked, so perfectly incredulous that I was not at all surprised to hear him protest, by all the saints, that he never did--never would

do. Never. Never.... But why should he? Was he the prey of some strange hallucination? Rocking himself, he struck his breast with his clenched hand, then suddenly caught at his hair and remained perfectly motionless. Minutes passed; this despairing stillness inspired in me a feeling of awe at last--the awe of something inconceivable. My head buzzed so with the effort to think that I had the illusions of faint murmurs in the cave, the very shadows of murmurs. And all at once a real voice--his voice--burst out fearfully rapid and voluble.

He had really gone out to get a provision of water. Waking up early, he saw us sleeping, and felt a great pity for the senorita. As to the caballero--his saviour from drowning, alas!--the senorita would need every ounce of his strength. He would let us sleep till his return from the spring; and, there being a blessed freshness in the air, he caught up the flask and started bare-headed. The sun had just risen. Would to God he had never seen it! After plunging his face in the running water, he remained on his knees and busied himself in rinsing and filling the flask. The torrent, gushing with force, made a loud noise, and after he had done screwing the top on, he was about to rise, when, glancing about carelessly, he saw two men leaning on their escopetas and looking at him in perfect silence. They were standing right over him; he knew them well; one they called El Rubio; the other, the little one, was José--squinting José. They said nothing; nothing at all. With a sudden and mighty effort he preserved his self-command, affected unconcern and, instead of getting up, only shifted his pose to a sitting position, took off his shoes and stockings, and proceeded to bathe his feet. But it was as if a blazing fire had been kindled in his breast, and a tornado had been blowing in his head.

He could not tell whence these two had come, with what object, or how much they knew. They might have been only messengers from Rio Medio to Havana. They generally went in couples. If Manuel had escaped alive out of the sea, everything was known in Rio Medio. From where he sat he beheld the empty, open sea over the dunes, but the edge of the upland, cleft by many ravines (of which the one we had ascended was the deepest), concealed from him the little basin and the inlet. He was certain these men had not come up that way. They had approached him over the plain. But there was more than one way by which the upland could be reached from below. The thoughts rushed round and round his head. He remembered that our boat must be floating or lying stranded in the little bay, and resolved, in case of necessity, to say that we two were dead, that we had been drowned.

It was El Rubio who put the very question to him, in an insolent tone, and sitting on the ground out of his reach, with his gun across his knees. His long knife ready in his hand, squinting José remained standing over Castro. Those two men nodded to each other significantly at the intelligence. He perceived that they were

more than half disposed to credit his story. They had nearly been drowned themselves pursuing that accursed heretic of an Englishman. When, from their remarks, he learned that the schooner was in the bay, he began putting on his shoes, though the hope of making a sudden dash for his life down the ravine abandoned him.

The schooner had been run in at night during the gale, and in such distress that they let her take the ground. She was not injured, however, and some of them were preparing to haul her off. Our boat, as I conceived, after bumping along the beach, had drifted within the influence of the current created by the little river, or else by the water forced into the basin by the tempest, seeking to escape, and had been carried out towards the inlet. She was seen at daylight, knocking about amongst the breakers, bottom up, and in such shallow water that three or four men wading out knee-deep managed to turn her over. They had found Mrs. Williams' woollen shawl and my cap floating underneath. At the same time the broken mast and sail were made out, tossing upon the waves, not very far off to seaward. That the boat had been in the bay at all did not seem to have occurred to them. It had been concluded that she had capsized outside the entrance. It was very possible that we had been drowned under her. Castro hastened to confirm the idea by relating how he had been clinging to the bottom of the boat for a long time. Thus he had saved himself, he declared.

"Manuel will be glad," observed El Rubio then, with an evil laugh. And for a long time nobody said a word.

El Rubio, cross-legged, was observing him with the eyes of a basilisk, but Castro swore a great oath that, as to himself, he showed no signs of fear. He looked at the water gushing from the rock, bubbling up, sparkling, running away in a succession of tiny leaps and falls. Why should he fear? Was he not old, and tired, and without any hope of peace on earth? What was death? Nothing. It was absolutely nothing. It comes to all. It was rest after much vain trouble--and he trusted that, through his devotion to the Mother of God, his sins would be forgiven after a short time in purgatory. But, as he had made up his mind not to fall into Manuel's hands, he resolved that presently he would stab himself to the heart, where he sat--over this running water. For it would not be like a suicide. He was doomed, and surely God did not want his body to be tormented by such a devil as Manuel before death.

He would lean far over before he struck his faithful blade into his breast, so as to fall with his face in the water. It looked deliciously cool, and the sun was heavy on his bare head. Suddenly, El Rubio sprang to his feet, saying:

"Now, José."

It is clear that these ruffians stood in awe of his blade. In their cowardly hearts they did not think it quite safe (being only two to one) to try and disarm that old man. They backed away a step or two, and, levelling their pieces, suddenly ordered him to get up and walk before. He threw at them an obscene word. He thought to himself, "Bueno! They will blow my head off my shoulders." No emotion stirred in him, as if his blood had already ceased to run in his veins. They remained, all three, in a state of suspended animation, but at last El Rubio hissed through his teeth with vexation, and grunted:

"Attention, José. Take aim. We will break his legs and take away the sting of this old scorpion."

Castro's blood felt chilly in his limbs, but instead of planting his knife in his breast, he spoke up to ask them where, supposing he consented, they wished to conduct him.

"To Manuel--our captain. He would like to embrace you before you die," said El Rubio, advancing a stride nearer, his gun to his shoulder. "Get up! March!"

And Castro found himself on his feet, looking straight into the black holes of the barrels.

"Walk!" they exclaimed together, stepping upon him.

The time had come to die.

"Ha! Canalla!" he said.

They made a menacing clamour, "Walk viejo, traitor; walk."

"Señorita--I walked." The heartrending effort of the voice, the trembling of this gray head, the sobs under the words, oppressed our breast with dismay and dread. Ardently he would have us believe that at this juncture he was thinking of us only--of us wondering, alone, ignorant of danger, and hidden blindly under the earth. His purpose was to provoke the two Luga-reños to shoot, so that we should be warned by the reports. Besides, an opportunity for escape might yet present itself in some most unlikely way, perhaps at the very last moment. Had he not his own life in his own hands? He cared not for it. It was in his power to end it at any time. And there would be dense thickets on the way; long grass where one could plunge suddenly--who knows! And overgrown ravines where one could hide--creep under the bushes--escape--and return with help.... But when he faced the plains its greatness crushed his poor strength. The uncovered vastness

imprisoned him as effectually as a wall. He knew himself for what he was: an old man, short of breath, heavy of foot; nevertheless he walked on hastily, his eyes on the ground. The footsteps of his captors sounded behind him, and he tried to edge towards the ravine. When nearly above the opening of the cavern he would, he thought, swerve inland, and dash off as fast as he was able. Then they would have to fire at him; we would be sure to hear the shots, the warning would be clear... and suddenly, looking up, he saw that a small band of Lugareños, having just ascended the brow of the upland, were coming to meet him. Now was the time to get shot; he turned sharply, and began to run over that great plain towards a distant clump of trees.

Nobody fired at him. He heard only the mingled jeers and shouts of the two men behind, "Quicker, Castro; quicker!" They followed him, holding their sides. Those ahead had already spread themselves out over the plain, yelling to each other, and were converging upon him. That was the time to stop, and with one blow fall dead at their feet. He doubled round in front of Manuel, who stood waving his arms and screeching orders, and ran back towards the ravine. The plain rang with furious shouts. They rushed at him from every side. He would throw himself over. It was a race for the precipice. He won it.

I suppose he found it not so easy to die, to part with the warmth of sunshine, the taste of food; to break that material servitude to life, contemptible as a vice, that binds us about like a chain on the limbs of hopeless slaves. He showered blows upon his chest, sitting before us, he battered with his fist at the side of his head till I caught his arm. We could always sell our lives dearly, I said. He would have to defend the entrance with me. We two could hold it till it was blocked with their corpses.

He jumped up with a derisive shriek; a cloud of ashes flew from under his stumble, and he vanished in the darkness with mad gesticulations.

"Their corpses--their corpses--their... Ha! ha! ha!"

The snarling sound died away; and I understood, then, what meant this illusion of ghostly murmurs that once or twice had seemed to tremble in the narrow region of gray light around the arch. The sunshine of the earth, and the voices of men, expired on the threshold of the eternal obscurity and stillness in which we were imprisoned, as if in a grave with inexorable death standing between us and the free spaces of the world.