

CHAPTER NINE

For it meant that. Imprisoned! Castro's derisive shriek meant that. And I had known it before. He emerged back out of the black depths, with livid, swollen features, and foam about his mouth, to splutter:

"Their corpses, you say... Ha! Our corpses," and retreated again, where I could only hear incoherent mutters.

Seraphina clutched my arm. "Juan--together--no separation."

I had known it, even as I spoke of selling our lives dearly. They could only be surrendered. Surrendered miserably to these wretches, or to the everlasting darkness in which Castro muttered his despair. I needed not to hear this ominous and sinister sound--nor yet Seraphina's cry. She understood, too. They would never come down unless to look upon us when we were dead. I need not have gone to the entrance of the cave to understand all the horror of our fate. The Lugareños had already lighted a fire. Very near the brink, too.

It was burning some thirty feet above my head; and the sheer wall on the other side caught up and sent across into my face the crackling of dry branches, the loud excited talking, the arguments, the oaths, the laughter; now and then a very shriek of joy. Manuel was giving orders. Some advanced the opinion that the cursed Inglez, the spy who came from Jamaica to see whom he could get for a hanging without a priest, was down there, too. So that was it! O'Brien knew how to stir their hate. I should get a short shrift. "He was a fiend, the Inglez: look how many of us he has killed!" they cried; and Manuel would have loved to cut my flesh, in small pieces, off my bones--only, alas! I was now beyond his vengeance, he feared. However, somebody was left.

He must have thrown himself flat, with his head over the brink, for his yell of "Castro!" exploded, and rolled heavily between the rocks.

"Castro! Castro! Castro!" he shouted twenty times, till he set the whole ravine in an uproar. He waited, and when the clamour had quieted down amongst the bushes below, called out softly, "Do you hear me, Castro, my victim? Thou art my victim, Castro."

Castro had crept into the passage after me. He pushed his head beyond my shoulder.

"I defy thee, Manuel," he screamed.

A hubbub arose. "He's there! He is there!"

"Bravo, Castro," Manuel shouted from above. "I love thee because thou art my victim. I shall sing a song for thee. Come up. Hey! Castro! Castro! Come up.... No? Then the dead to their grave, and the living to their feast."

Sometimes a little earth, detached from the layer of soil covering the rock, would fall streaming from above. The men told off to guard the cornice walked to and fro near the edge, and the confused murmur of voices hung subdued in the air of the cleft, like a modulated tremor. Castro, moaning gently, stumbled back into the cave.

Seraphina had remained sitting on the stone seat. The twilight rested on her knees, on her face, on the heap of cold ashes at her feet. But Castro, who had stood stock-still, with a hand to his forehead, turned to me excitedly:

"The peons, for Dios!" Had I ever thought of the peons belonging to the estancia?

Well, that was a hope. I did not know exactly how matters stood between them and the Lugareños. There was no love lost. A fight was likely; but, even if no actual collision took place, they would be sure to visit the camp above in no very friendly spirit; a chance might offer to make our position known to these men, who had no reason to hate either me or Castro--and would not be afraid of thwarting the miserable band of ghouls sitting above our grave. How our presence could be made known I was not sure. Perhaps simply by shouting with all our might from the mouth of the cave. We could offer rewards--say who we were, summon them for the service of their own Señorita. But, probably, they had never heard of her. No matter. The news would soon reach the hacienda, and Enrico had two hundred slaves at his back. One of us must always remain at the mouth of the cave listening to what went on above. There would be the trampling of horses' hoofs--quarrelling, no doubt--anyway, much talk--new voices--something to inform us. Only, how soon would they come? They were not likely to be riding where there were no cattle. Had Castro seen any signs of a herd on the uplands near by?

His face fell. He had not. There were many savannas within the belt of forests, and the herds might be miles away, stampeded inland by the storm. Sitting down suddenly, as if overcome, he averted his eyes and began to scratch the rock between his legs with the point of his blade.

We were all silent. How long could we wait? How long could people live?... I looked

at Seraphina. How long could she live?... The thought seared my heart like a hot iron. I wrung my hands stealthily.

"Ha! my blade!" muttered Castro. "My sting.... Old scorpion! They did not take my sting away.... Only--bah!"

He, a man, had not risen to the fortitude of a venomous creature. He was defeated. He groaned profoundly. Life was too much. It clung to one. A scorpion--an insect--within a ring of flames, would lift its sting and stab venom into its own head. And he--Castro--a man--a man, por Dios--had less firmness than a creeping thing. Why--why, did he not stab this dishonoured old heart?

"Señorita," he cried agonizingly, "I swear I did shout to them to fire--so--in to my breast--and then..."

Seraphina leaned over him pityingly.

"Enough, Castro. One lives because of hope. And grieve not. Thy death would have done no good."

Her face had a splendid pallor, the radiant whiteness and majesty of marble; it had never before appeared to me more beautiful: and her hair unrolling its dark undulations, as if tinged deep with the funereal gloom of the background, covered her magnificently right down to her elbows. Her eyes were incredibly profound. Her person had taken on an indefinable beauty, a new beauty, that, like the comeliness that comes from joy, love, or success, seemed to rise from the depths of her being, as if an unsuspected and sombre quality of her soul had responded to the horror of our situation. The fierce trials had gradually developed her, as burning sunshine opens the bud of a flower; and I beheld her now in the plenitude of her nature. From time to time Castro would raise up to her his blinking old eyes, full of timidity and distress.

He had not been young enough to throw himself over--he had worn the chain for too many years, had lived well and softly too long, was too old a slave. And yet--if he had had the courage of the act! Who knows? I rejected the thought far from me. It returned, and I caught myself looking at him with irritated eyes. But this first day passed not intolerably. We ignored our sufferings. Indeed, I felt none for my part. We had kept our thoughts bound to the slow blank minutes. And if we exchanged a few words now and then, it was to speak of patience, of resolution to endure and to hope.

At night, from the hot ravine full of shadows, came the cool fretting of the stream. The big blaze they kept up above crackled distinctly, throwing a fiery, restless

stain on the face of the rock in front of the cave, high up under the darkness and the stars of the sky--and a pair of feet would appear stamping, the shadow of a pair of ankles and feet, fantastic, sustaining no gigantic body, but enormous, tramping slowly, resembling two coffins leaping to a slow measure. I see them in my dreams now, sometimes. They disappeared.

Manuel would sing; far in the night the monotonous staccato of the guitar went on, accompanying plaintive murmurs, outbursts of anger and cries of pain, the tremulous moans of sorrow. My nerves vibrated, I broke my nails on the rock, and seemed to hear once more the parody of all the transports and of every anguish, even to death--a tragic and ignoble rendering of life. He was a true artist, powerful and scorned, admired with derision, obeyed with jeers. It was a song of mourning; he sat on the brink with his feet dangling over the precipice that sent him back his inspired tones with a confused noise of sobs and desolation.... His idol had been snatched from the humility of his adoring silence, like a falling star from the sight of the worm that crawls.... He stormed on the strings; and his voice emerged like the crying of a castaway in the tumult of the gale. He apostrophized his instrument.... Woe! Woe! No more songs. He would break it. Its work was done. He would dash it against the rock.... His palm slapped the hollow wood furiously.... So that it should lie shattered and mute like his own heart!

A frenzied explosion of yells, jests, and applause covered the finale.

A complete silence would follow, as if in the acclamations they had exhausted at once every bestial sound. Somebody would cough pitifully for a long time--and when he had done spluttering and cursing, the world outside appeared lost in an even more profound stillness. The red stain of the fire wavered across to play under the dark brow of the rock. The irritated murmur of the torrent, tearing along below, returned timidly at first, expanded, filled the ravine, ran through my ears in an angry babble. The deadened footfalls on the brink sometimes dislodged a pebble: it would start with a feeble rattle and be heard no more.

In the daytime, too, there were silences up there, perfect, profound. No prowling of feet disturbed them; the sun blazed between the rocks, and even the hum of insects could be heard. It seemed impossible not to believe that they had all died by a miracle, or else had been driven away by a silent panic. But two or more were always on the watch, directly above, with their heads over the edge; and suddenly they would begin to talk together in drowsy tones. It was as if some barbarous somnambulists had mumbled in the daytime the bizarre atrocity of their thoughts.

They discussed Williams' flask, which had been picked up. Was the cup made of

silver, they wondered. Manuel had appropriated it for his own use, it seems. Well--he was the capataz. The Inglez, should he appear by an impossible chance, was to be shot down at once; but Castro must be allowed to give himself up. And they would snigger ferociously. Sometimes quarrels arose, very noisy, a great hubbub of bickerings touching their jealousies, their fears, their unspeakable hopes of murder and rapine. They did not feel very safe where they were. Some would maintain that Castro could not have saved himself, alone. The Inglez was there, and even the senorita herself... Manuel scouted the idea with contempt. He advanced the violence of the storm, the fury of the waves, the broken mast, the position of the boat. How could they expect a woman!.... No. It was as his song had it. And he defended his point of view angrily, as though he could not bear being robbed of that source of poetical inspiration. He emitted profound sighs and superb declamations.

Castro and I listened to them at the mouth of the cave. Our tongues were dry and swollen in our mouths, there was the pressure of an iron clutch on our windpipes, fire in our throats, and the pangs of hunger that tore at us like iron pincers. But we could hear that the bandits above were anxious to be gone; they had but very few charges for their guns, and it was apparent that they were afraid of a collision with the peons of the hacienda. Glaring at each other with bloodshot, uncertain eyes, Castro and I imagined longingly a vision of men in ponchos spurring madly out of the woods, bent low, and swinging riatas over the necks of their horses--with the thunder of the galloping hoofs in the cave. Seraphina had withdrawn further into the darkness. And, with a shrinking fear, I would join her, to eat my heart out by the side of her tense and mute contemplation.

Sometimes Manuel would begin again, "Castro! Castro! Castro!" till he seemed to stagger the rocks and disturb the placid sunshine with an immense wave of sound. He called upon his victim to drink once more before he died. Long shrieks of derision rent the air, as if torn out of his breast by far greater torments than any his fancy delighted to invent. There was something terrible and weird in the abundance of words screeched continuously, without end, as if in desperation. No wonder Castro fled from the passage. And Seraphina and I, within, would be startled out of our half-delirious state by the sudden appearance of that old man, disordered, sordid, with a white beard sprouting, who wandered, weeping aloud in the twilight.

More than once I would stagger off far away into the depths of the cavern in an access of rage, fling myself on the floor, bite my arms, beat my head on the rock. I would give myself up. She must be saved from this tortured death. She had said she would throw herself over if I left her. But would she have the strength? It was impossible to know. For days it seemed she had been lying perfectly still, on her

side, one hand under her wan cheek, and only answering "Juan" when I pronounced her name. There was something awful in our dry whispers. They were lifeless, like the tones of the dead, if the dead ever speak to each other across the earth separating the graves. The moral suffering, joined to the physical torture of hunger and thirst, annihilated my will in a measure, but also kindled a vague, gnawing feeling of hostility against her. She asked too much of me. It was too much. And I would drag myself back to sit for hours, and with an aching heart look towards her couch from a distance.

My eyes, accustomed to obscurity, traced an indistinct and recumbent form. Her forehead was white; her hair merged into the darkness which was gathering slowly upon her eyes, her cheeks, her throat. She was perfectly still. It was cruel, it was odious, it was intolerable to be so still. This must end. I would carry her out by main force. She said no word, but there was in the embrace of those arms instantly thrown around my neck, in the feel of those dry lips pressed upon mine, in the emaciated face, in the big shining eyes of that being as light as a feather, a passionate mournfulness of seduction, a tenacious clinging to the appointed fate, that suddenly overawed my movement of rage. I laid her down again, and covered my face with my hands. She called out to Castro. He reeled, as if drunk, and waited at the head of her couch, with his chin dropped on his breast. "Vuestra, Señoria," he muttered.

"Listen well, Castro." Her voice was very faint, and each word came alone, as if shrunk and parched. "Can my gold--the promise of much gold--you know these men--save the lives...?"

He uttered a choked cry, and began to tremble, groping for her hand.

"Si, Señorita. Excellency, si. It would. Mercy. Save me. I am too old to bear this. Gold, yes; much gold. Manuel...."

"Listen, Castro.... And Don Juan?" His head fell again. "Speak the truth, Castro."

He struggled with himself; then, rattling in his throat, shrieked "No!" with a terrible effort. "No. Nothing can save thy English lover." "Why?" she breathed feebly. He raged at her in his weakness. Why? Because the order had gone forth; because they dared not disobey. Because she had only gold in the palm of her hand, while Señor O'Brien held all their lives in his. The accursed Juez was for them like death itself that walks amongst men, taking this one, leaving another.

He was their life, and their law, and their safety, and their death--and the caballero had not killed him....

His voice seemed to wither and dry up gradually in his throat. He crawled away, and we heard him chuckling horribly somewhere, like a madman. Seraphina stretched out her hand.

"Then, Juan--why not together--like this?"

If she had the courage of this death, I must have even more. It was a point of honour. I had no wish, and no right, to seek for some easier way out of life. But she had a woman's capacity for passive endurance, a serenity of mind in this martyrdom confessing to something sinister in the power of love that, like faith, can move mountains and order cruel sacrifices. She could have walked out in perfect safety--and it was that thought that maddened me. And there was no sleep; there were only intervals in which I could fall into a delirious reverie of still lakes, of vast sheets of water. I waded into them up to my lips. Never further. They were smooth and cold as ice; I stood in them shivering and straining for a draught, burning within with the fire of thirst, while a phantom all pale, and with its hair streaming, called to me "Courage!" from the brink in Seraphina's voice. As to Castro, he was going mad. He was simply going mad, as people go mad for want of food and drink. And yet he seemed to keep his strength. He was never still. It was a factitious strength, the restlessness of incipient insanity. Once, while I was trying to talk with him about our only hope--the peons--he gave me a look of such sombre distraction that I left off, intimidated, to wonder vaguely at this glimpse of something hidden and excessive springing from torments which surely could be no greater than mine.

He had the strength, and sometimes he could find the voice, to hurl abuse, curses, and imprecations from the mouth of the cave. Great shouts of laughter exploded above, and they seemed to hold their breath to hear more; or Manuel, hanging over, would praise in mocking, mellifluous accents the energy of his denunciations. I tried to pull him away from there, but he turned upon me fiercely; and from prudence--for all hope was not dead in me yet--I left him alone.

That night I heard him make an extraordinary sound chewing; at the same time he was sobbing and cursing stealthily. He had found something to eat, then! I could not believe my ears, but I began to creep towards the sound, and suddenly there was a short, mad scuffle in the darkness, during which I nearly spitted myself on his blade. At last, trembling in every limb, with my blood beating furiously in my ears, I scrambled to my feet, holding a small piece of meat in my hands. Instantly, without hesitating, without thinking, I plunged my teeth into it only to fling it far away from me with a frantic execration. This was the first sound uttered since we had grappled. Lying prone near me, Castro, with a rattle in his throat, tried to laugh.

This was a supreme touch of Manuel's art; they were pressed for time, and he had hit upon that deep and politic invention to hasten the surrender of his beloved victim. I nearly cried with the fiery pain on my cracked lips. That piece of half-putrid flesh was salt--horribly salt--salt like salt itself. Whenever they heard him rave and mutter at the mouth of the cave, they would throw down these prepared scraps. It was as if I had put a live coal into my mouth.

"Ha!" he croaked feebly. "Have you thrown it away? I, too; the first piece. No matter. I can no more swallow anything, now."

His voice was like the rustling of parchment at my feet.

"Do not look for it, Don Juan. The sinners in hell.... Ha! Fiend. I could not resist."

I sank down by his side. He seemed to be writhing on the floor muttering, "Thirst--thirst--thirst." His blade clicked on the rock; then all was still. Was he dead? Suddenly he began with an amazingly animated utterance.

"Señor! For this they had to kill cattle."

This thought had kept him up. Probably, they had been firing shots. But there was a way of hamstringing a stalked cow silently; and the plains were vast, the grass on them was long; the carcasses would lie hidden out of sight; the herds were rounded up only twice every year. His despairing voice died out in a mournful fall, and again he was as still as death.

"No! I can bear this no longer," he uttered with force. He refused to bear it. He suffered too much. There was no hope. He would overwhelm them with maledictions, and then leap down from the ledge. "Adios, Señor."

I stretched out my arm and caught him by the leg. It seemed to me I could not part with him. It would have been disloyal, an admission that all was over, the beginning of the end. We were exhausting ourselves by this sort of imbecile wrestling. Meantime, I kept on entreating him to be a man; and at last I managed to clamber upon his chest. "A man!" he sighed. I released him. For a space, unheard in the darkness, he seemed to be collecting all his remaining strength.

"Oh, those strange Inglez! Why should I not leap? and whom do you love best or hate more, me or the senorita? Be thou a man, also, and pray God to give thee reason to understand men for once in thy life. Ha! Enamoured woman--he is a fool! But I, Castro...."

His whispering became appallingly unintelligible, then ceased, passing into a

moan. My will to restrain him abandoned me. He had brought this on us. And if he really wished to give up the struggle....

"Señor," he mumbled brokenly, "a thousand thanks. Br-r-r! Oh, the ugly water--water--water--salt water--salt! You saved me. Why? Let God be the Judge. I would have preferred a malignant demon for a friend. I forgive you. Adios! And--- Her Excellency--poor Castro.... Ha! Thou old scorpion, encircled by fire--by fire and thirst. No. No scorpion, alas! Only a man--not like you--therefore--a Mass--or two--perhaps...."

The freshness of the night penetrated through the arch, as far as the faint twilight of the day. I heard his tearful muttering creep away from my side. "Thirst--thirst--thirst." I did not stir; and an incredulity, a weariness, the sense of our common fate, mingled with an unconfessed desire--the desire of seeing what would come of it--a desire that stirred my blood like a glimmer of hope, and prevented me from making a movement or uttering a whisper. If his sufferings were so great, who was I to... Mine, too. I almost envied him. He was free.

As if an inward obscurity had parted in two I looked to the very bottom of my thoughts. And his action appeared like a sacrifice. It could liberate us two from this cave before it was too late. He, he alone, was the prey they had trapped. They would be satisfied, probably. Nay! There could be no doubt. Directly he was dead they would depart. Ah! he wanted to leap. He must not be allowed. Now that I understood perfectly what this meant, I had to prevent him. There was no choice. I must stop him at any cost.

The awakening of my conscience sent me to my feet; but before I had stumbled halfway through the passage I heard his shout in the open air, "Behold me!"

A man outside cried excitedly, "He is out!"

An exulting tumult fell into the arch, the clash of twenty voices yelling in different keys, "He is out--the traitor! He is out!" I was too late, but I made three more hesitating steps and stood blinded. The flaming branches they were holding over the precipice showered a multitude of sparks, that fell disappearing continuously in the lurid light, shutting out the night from the mouth of the cave. And in this light Castro could be seen kneeling on the other side of the sill.

With his fingers clutching the edge of the slab, he hung outwards, his head falling back, his spine arched tensely, like a bow; and the red sparks coming from above with the dancing whirl of snowflakes, vanished in the air before they could settle on his face.

"Manuel! Manuel!"

They answered with a deep, confused growl, jostling and crowding on the edge to look down into his eyes. Meantime I stared at the convulsive heaving of his breast, at his upturned chin, his swelling throat. He defied Manuel. He would leap. Behold! he was going to leap--to his own death--in his own time. He challenged them to come down on the ledge; and the blade of the maimed arm waved to and fro stiffly, point up, like a red-hot weapon in the light. He devoted them to pestilence, to English gallows, to the infernal powers: while all the time commenting murmurs passed over his head, as though he had extorted their sinister appreciation.

"Canalla! dogs, thieves, prey of death, vermin of hell--I spit on you--like this!"

He had not the force, nor the saliva, and remained straining mutely upwards while they laughed at him all together, with something sombre, and as if doomed in their derision.... "He will jump! No, he will not!" "Yes! Leap, Castro! Spit, Castro!" "He will run back into the cave! Maladetta!"... Manuel's voiced cooed lovingly on the brink:

"Come to us and drink, Castro."

I waited for his leap with doubt, with disbelief, in the helpless agitation of the weak. Gradually he seemed to relax all over.

"Drink deep; drink, and drink, and drink, Castro. Water. Clear water, cool water. Taste, Castro!"

He called on him in tones that were almost tender in their urgency, to come and drink before he died. His voice seemed to cast a spell, like an incantation, upon the tubby little figure, with something yearning in the upward turn of the listening face.

"Drink!" Manuel repeated the word several times; then, suddenly he called, "Taste, Castro, taste," and a descending brightness, as of a crystal rod hurled from above, shivered to nothing on the upturned face. The light disappearing from before the cave seemed scared away by the inhuman discord of his shriek; and I flung myself forward to lick the splash of moisture on the sill. I did not think of Castro, I had forgotten him. I raged at the deception of my thirst, exploring with my tongue the rough surface of the stone till I tasted my own blood. Only then, raising my head to gasp, and clench my fists with a baffled and exasperated desire, I noticed how profound was the silence, in which the words, "Take away his sting," seemed to pronounce themselves over the ravine in the

impersonal austerity of the rock, and with the tone of a tremendous decree.