

CHAPTER TEN

He had surrendered to his thirst. What weakness! He had not thrown himself over, then. What folly! One splash of water on his face had been enough. He was contemptible; and lying collapsed, in a sort of tormented apathy, at the mouth of the cave, I despised and envied his good fortune. It could not save him from death, but at least he drank. I understood this when I heard his voice, a voice altogether altered--a firm, greedy voice saying, "More," breathlessly. And then he drank again. He was drinking. He was drinking up there in the light of the fire, in a circle of mortal enemies, under Manuel's gloating eyes. Drinking! O happiness! O delight! What a miserable wretch! I clawed the stone convulsively; I think I would have rushed out for my share if I had not heard Manuel's cruel and caressing voice:

"How now? You do not want to throw yourself over, my Castro?"

"I have drunk," he said gloomily.

I think they must have given him something to eat then. In my mind there are many blanks in the vision of that scene, a vision built upon a few words reaching me, suddenly, with great intervals of silence between, as though I had been coming to myself out of a dead faint now and then. A ferocious hum of many voices would rise sometimes impatiently, the scrambling of feet near the edge; or, in a sinister and expectant stillness, Manuel the artist would be speaking to his "beloved victim Castro" in a gentle and insinuating voice that seemed to tremble slightly with eagerness. Had he eaten and drunk enough? They had kept their promises, he said. They would keep them all. The water had been cool--and presently he, Manuel-del-Popolo, would accompany with his guitar and his voice the last moments of his victim. Bursts of laughter punctuated his banter. Ah! that Manuel, that Manuel! Some actually swore in admiration. But was Castro really at his ease? Was it not good to eat and drink? Had he quite returned to life? But, Caramba, amigos, what neglect! The caballero who has honoured us must smoke. They shouted in high glee: "Yes. Smoke, Castro. Let him smoke." I suppose he did; and Manuel expounded to him how pleasant life was in which one could eat, and drink, and smoke. His words tortured me. Castro remained mute--from disdain, from despair, perhaps. Afterwards they carried him along clear of the cornice, and I understood they formed a half-circle round him, drawing their knives. Manuel, screeching in a high falsetto, ordered the bonds of his feet to be cut. I advanced my head out as far as I dared; their voices reached me deadened; I could only see the profound shadow of the ravine, a patch of dark clear sky opulent with stars, and the play of the firelight on the opposite side. The

shadow of a pair of monumental feet, and the lower edge of a cloak, spread amply like a skirt, stood out in it, intensely black and motionless, right in front of the cave. Now and then, elbowed in the surge round Castro, the guitar emitted a deep and hollow resonance. He was tumultuously ordered to stand up and, I imagine, he was being pricked with the points of their knives till he did get on his feet. "Jump!" they roared all together--and Manuel began to finger the strings, lifting up his voice between the gusts of savage hilarity, mingled with cries of death. He exhorted his followers to close on the traitor inch by inch, presenting their knives.

"He runs here and there, the blood trickling from his limbs--but in vain, this is the appointed time for the leap...."

It was an improvisation; they stamped their feet to the slow measure; they shouted in chorus the one word "Leap!" raising a ferocious roar; and between whiles the song of voice and strings came to me from a distance, softened and lingering in a voluptuous and pitiless cadence that wrung my heart, and seemed to eat up the remnants of my strength. But what could I have done, even if I had had the strength of a giant, and a most fearless resolution? I should have been shot dead before I had crawled halfway up the ledge. A piercing shriek covered the guitar, the song, and the wild merriment.

Then everything seemed to stop--even my own painful breathing. Again Castro shrieked like a madman:

"Señorita--your gold. Señorita! Hear me! Help!"

Then all was still.

"Hear the dead calling to the dead," sneered Manuel.

An awestruck sort of hum proceeded from the Spaniards. Was the señorita alive? In the cave? Or where?

"Her nod would have saved thee, Castro," said Manuel slowly. I got up. I heard Castro stammer wildly:

"She shall fill both your hands with gold. Do you hear, hombres? I, Castro, tell you--each man--both hands-----"

He had done it. The last hope was gone now. And all that there remained for me to do was to leap over or give myself up, and end this horrible business.

"She was a creature born to command the moon and the stars," Manuel mused

aloud in a vibrating tone, and suddenly smote the strings with emphatic violence. She could even stay his vengeance. But was it possible! No, no. It could not be--and yet....

"Thou art alive yet, Castro," he cried. "Thou hast eaten and drunk; life is good--is it not, old man?--and the leap is high."

He thundered "Silence!" to still the excited murmurs of his band. If she lived Castro should live, too--he, Manuel, said so; but he threatened him with horrible tortures, with two days of slow dying, if he dared to deceive. Let him, then, speak the truth quickly.

"Speak, 'viejo'. Where is she?"

And at the opening, fifty yards away, I was tempted to call out, as though I had loved Castro well enough to save him from the shame and remorse of a plain betrayal. That the moment of it had come I could have no doubt. And it was I myself, perhaps, who could not face the certitude of his downfall. If my throat had not been so compressed, so dry with thirst and choked with emotion, I believe I should have cried out and brought them away from that miserable man with a rush. Since we were lost, he at least should be saved from this. I suffered from his spasmodic, agonized laugh away there, with twenty knives aimed at his breast and the eighty-foot drop of the precipice at his back. Why did he hesitate?

I was to learn, then, that the ultimate value of life to all of us is based on the means of self-deception. Morally he had his back against the wall, he could not hope to deceive himself; and after Manuel had cried again at him, "Where are they?" in a really terrible tone, I heard his answer:

"At the bottom of the sea."

He had his own courage after all--if only the courage not to believe in Manuel's promises. And he must have been weary of his life--weary enough not to pay that price. And yet he had gone to the very verge, calling upon Seraphina as if she could hear him. Madness of fear, no doubt--succeeded by an awakening, a heroic reaction. And yet sometimes it seems to me as if the whole scene, with his wild cries for help, had been the outcome of a supreme exercise of cunning. For, indeed, he could not have invented anything better to bring the conviction of our death to the most sceptical of those ruffians. All I heard after his words had been a great shout, followed by a sudden and unbroken silence. It seemed to last a very long time. He had thrown himself over! It is like the blank space of a swoon to me, and yet it must have been real enough, because, huddled up just inside the sill, with my head reposing wearily on the stone, I watched three moving

flames of lighted branches carried by men follow each other closely in a swaying descent along the path on the other side of the ravine. They passed on downwards, flickering out of view. Then, after a time, a voice below, to the left of the cave, ascended with a hooting and mournful effect from the depths.

"Manuel! Manuel! We have found him!... Es muerte!"

And from above Manuel's shout rolled, augmented, between the rocks.

"Bueno! Turn his face up--for the birds!"

They continued calling to each other for a good while. The men below declared their intention of going on to the sea shore; and Manuel shouted to them not to forget to send him up a good rope early in the morning. Apparently, the schooner had been refloated some time before; many of the Lugareños were to sleep on board. They purposed to set sail early next day.

This revived me, and I spent the night between Seraphina's couch and the mouth of the cave, keeping tight hold of my reason that seemed to lose itself in this hope, in this darkness, in this torment. I touched her cheek, it was hot--while her forehead felt to my fingers as cold as ice. I had no more voice, but I tried to force out some harsh whispers through my throat. They sounded horrible to my own ears, and she endeavoured to soothe me by murmuring my name feebly. I believe she thought me delirious. I tried to pray for my strength to last till I could carry her out of that cave to the side of the brook--then let death come. "Live, live," I whispered into her ear, and would hear a sigh so faint, so feeble, that it swayed all my soul with pity and fear, "Yes, Juan."... And I would go away to watch for the dawn from the mouth of the cave, and curse the stars that would not fade.

Manuel's voice always steadied me. A languor had come over them above, as if their passion had been exhausted; as if their hearts had been saddened by an unbridled debauch. There was, however, their everlasting quarrelling. Several of them, I understood, left the camp for the schooner, but avoiding the road by the ravine as if Castro's dead body down there had made it impassable. And the talk went on late into the night. There was some superstitious fear attached to the cave--a legend of men who had gone in and had never come back any more. All they knew of it was the region of twilight; formerly, when they used the shelter of the cavern, no one, it seems, ever ventured outside the circle of the fire. Manuel disdained their fears. Had he not been such a profound politico, a man of stratagems, there would have been a necessity to go down and see.... They all protested.

Who was going down? Not they.... Their craven cowardice was amazing.

He begged them to keep themselves quiet. They had him for Capataz now. A man of intelligence. Had he not enticed Castro out? He had never believed there was any one else in there. He sighed. Otherwise Castro would have tried to save his life by confessing. There had been nothing to confess. But he had the means of making sure. A voice suggested that the Inglez might have withdrawn himself into the depths. These English were not afraid of demons, being devils themselves; and this one was fiendishly reckless. But Manuel observed, contemptuously, that a man trapped like this would remain near the opening. Hope would keep him there till he died--unless he rushed out like Castro--Manuel laughed, but in a mournful tone: and, listening to the craven talk of their doubts and fears, it seemed to me that if I could appear at one bound amongst them, they would scatter like chaff before my glance. It seemed intolerable to wait; more than human strength could bear. Would the day never come? A drowsiness stole upon their voices.

Manuel kept watch. He fed the fire, and his incomplete shadow, projected across the chasm, would pass and return, obscuring the glow that fell on the rock. His footsteps seemed to measure the interminable duration of the night. Sometimes he would stop short and talk to himself in low, exalted mutters. A big bright star rested on the brow of the rock opposite, shining straight into my eyes. It sank, as if it had plunged into the stone. At last. Another came to look into the cavern. I watched the gradual coming of a gray sheen from the side of Seraphina's couch. This was the day, the last day of pain, or else of life. Its ghostly edge invaded slowly the darkness of the cave towards its appointed limit, creeping slowly, as colourless as spilt water on the floor. I pressed my lips silently upon her cheek. Her eyes were open. It seemed to me she had a smile fainter than her sighs. She was very brave, but her smile did not go beyond her lips. Not a feature of her face moved. I could have opened my veins for her without hesitation, if it had not been a forbidden sacrifice.

Would they go? I asked myself. Through Castro's heroism or through his weakness, perhaps through both the heroism and the weakness of that man, they must be satisfied. They must be. I could not doubt it; I could not believe it. Everything seemed improbable; everything seemed possible. If they descended I would, I thought, have the strength to carry her off, away into the darkness. If there was any truth in what I had overheard them saying, that the depths of the cavern concealed an abyss, we would cast ourselves into it.

The feeble, consenting pressure of her hand horrified me. They would not come down. They were afraid of that place, I whispered to her--and I thought to myself that such cowardice was incredible. Our fate was sealed. And yet from what I had heard....

We watched the daylight growing in the opening; at any moment it might have been obscured by their figures. The tormenting incertitudes of that hour were cruel enough to overcome, almost, the sensations of thirst, of hunger, to engender a restlessness that had the effect of renewed vigour. They were like a nightmare; but that nightmare seemed to clear my mind of its feverish hallucinations. I was more collected, then, than I had been for the last forty-eight hours of our imprisonment. But I could not remain there, waiting. It was absolutely necessary that I should watch at the entrance for the moment of their departure.

The morning was serenely cool and, in its stillness, their talk filled with clear-cut words the calm air of the ravine. A party--I could not tell how many--had already come up from the schooner in a great state of excitement. They feared that their presence had, in some way, become known to the peons of the hacienda. There was much abuse of a man called Carneiro, who, the day before, had fired an incautious shot at a fat cow on one of the inland savannas. They cursed him. Last night, before the moon rose, those on board the schooner had heard the whinnying of a horse. Somebody had ridden down to the water's edge in the darkness and, after waiting a while, had galloped back the way he came. The prints of hoofs on the beach showed that.

They feared these horsemen greatly. A vengeance was owing for the man Manuel had killed; and I could guess they talked with their faces over their shoulders. "And what about finding out whether the Inglez was there, dead or alive?" asked some.

I was sure, now, that they would not come down in a body. It would expose them to the danger of being caught in the cavern by the peons. There was no time for a thorough search, they argued.

For the first time that morning I heard Manuel's voice, "Stand aside."

He came down to the very brink.

"If the Inglez is down there, and if he is alive, he is listening to us now."

He was as certain as though he had been able to see me. He added:

"But there's no one."

"Go and look, Manuel," they cried.

He said something in a tone of contempt. The Voices above my head sank into

busy murmurs.

"Give me the rope here," he said aloud.

I had a feeling of some inconceivable danger nearing me; and in my state of weakness I began to tremble, backing away from the orifice. I had no strength in my limbs. I had no weapons. How could I fight? I would use my teeth. With a light knocking against the rock above the arch, Williams' flask, tied by its green cord to the end of a thick rope, descended slowly, and hung motionless before the entrance.

It had been freshly filled with water; it was dripping wet outside, and the silver top, struck by the sunbeams, dazzled my eyes.

This was the danger--this bait. And it seems to me that if I had had the slightest inkling of what was coming, I should have rushed at it instantly. But it took me some time to understand--to take in the idea that this was water, there, within reach of my hand. With a great effort I resisted the madness that incited me to hurl myself upon the flask. I hung back with all my power. A convulsive spasm contracted my throat. I turned about and fled out of the passage.

I ran to Seraphina. "Put out your hand to me," I panted in the darkness. "I need your help."

I felt it resting lightly on my bowed head. She did not even ask me what I meant; as if the greatness of her soul was omniscient. There was, in that silence, a supreme unselfishness, the unquestioning devotion of a woman.

"Patience, patience," I kept on muttering. I was losing confidence in myself. If only I had been free to dash my head against the rock. I had the courage for that, yet. But this was a situation from which there was no issue in death.

"We are saved," I murmured distractedly.

"Patience," she breathed out. Her hand slipped languidly off my head.

And I began to creep away from her side. I am here to tell the truth. I began to creep away towards the flask. I did not confess this to myself; but I know now. There was a devilish power in it. I have learned the nature of feelings in a man whom Satan beguiles into selling his soul--the horror of an irresistible and fatal longing for a supreme felicity. And in a drink of water for me, then, there was a greater promise than in universal knowledge, in unbounded power, in unlimited wealth, in imperishable youth. What could have been these seductions to a

drink? No soul had thirsted after things unlawful as my parched throat thirsted for water. No devil had ever tempted a man with such a bribe of perdition.

I suffered from the lucidity of my feelings. I saw, with indignation, my own wretched self being angled for like a fish. And with all that, in my forlorn state, I remained prudent. I did not rush out blindly. No. I approached the inner end of the passage, as though I had been stalking a wild creature, slowly, from the side. I crept along the wall of the cavern, and protruded my head far enough to look at the fiendish temptation.

There it was, a small dark object suspended in the light, with the yellow rock across the ravine for a background. The silver top shivered the sunbeams brilliantly. I had half hopes they had taken it away by this time. When I drew my head back I lost sight of it, but all my being went out to it with an almost pitiful longing. I remembered Castro for the first time in many hours. Was I nothing better than Castro? He had been angled for with salted meat. I shuddered. A darkness fell into the passage. I put down my uplifted foot without advancing. The unexpectedness of that shadow saved me, I believe. Manuel had descended the cornice.

He was alone. Standing before the outer opening, he darkened the passage, through which his talk to the people above came loudly into my ears. They could see now if he were not a worthy Capataz. If the Inglez was in there he was a corpse. And yet, of these living hearts above, of these valientes of Rio Medio, there was not one who would go alone to look upon a dead body. He had contrived an infallible test, and yet they would not believe him. Well, his valiance should prove it; his valiance, afraid neither of light nor of darkness.

I could not hear the answers he got from up there; but the vague sounds that reached me carried the usual commingling of derision and applause, the resentment of their jeers at the admiration he knew how to extort by the display of his talents.

They must kill the cattle, these caballeros. He scolded ironically. Of course. They must feed on meat like lions; but their souls were like the souls of hens born on dunghills. And behold! there was he, Manuel, not afraid of shadows.

He was coming in, there could be no doubt. Out there in the full light, he could not possibly have detected that rapid appearance of my head darted forward and withdrawn at once; but I had a view of his arm putting aside the swinging flask, of his leg raised to step over the high sill. I saw him, and I ran noiselessly away from the opening.

I had the time to charge Seraphina not to move, on our lives--on the wretched remnant of our lives--when his black shape stood in the frame of the opening, edged with a thread of light following the contour of his hat, of his shoulders, of his whole body down to his feet--whence a long shadow fell upon the pool of twilight on the floor.

What had made him come down? Vanity? The exacting demands of his leadership? Fear of O'Brien? The Juez would expect to hear something definite, and his band pretended not to believe in the stratagem of the bottle. I think that, for his part, from his knowledge of human nature, he never doubted its efficacy. He could not guess how very little, only, he was wrong. How very little! And yet he seemed rooted in incertitude on the threshold. His head turned from side to side. I could not make out his face as he stood, but the slightest of his movements did not escape me. He stepped aside, letting in all the fullness of the light.

Would he have the courage to explore at least the immediate neighbourhood of the opening? Who could tell his complex motives? Who could tell his purpose or his fears? He had killed a man in there once. But, then, he had not been alone. If he were only showing off before his unruly band, he need not stir a step further. He did not advance. He leaned his shoulders against the rock just clear of the opening. One half of him was lighted plainly; his long profile, part of his raven locks, one listless hand, his crossed legs, the buckle of one shoe.

"Nobody," he pronounced slowly, in a dead whisper.

While I looked at him, the profound politico, the artist, the everlastingly questioned Capataz, the man of talent and ability, he thought himself alone, and allowed his head to drop on his breast, as if saddened by the vanity of human ambition. Then, lifting it with a jerk, he listened with one ear turned to the passage; afterwards he peered into the cavern. Two long strides, over the cold heap of ashes, brought him to the stone seat.

It was very plain to me from his starting movements and attitudes, that he shared his uneasy attention between the inside and the outside of the cave. He sat down, but seemed ready to jump up; and I saw him turn his eyes upwards to the dark vault, as if on the alert for a noise from above. I am inclined to think he was expecting to hear the galloping hoofs of the peons' horses every moment. I think he did. The words "I am safer here than they above," were perfectly audible to me in the mumbling he kept up nervously. He wished to hear the sound of his own voice, as a timid person whistles and talks on a lonely road at night. Only the year before he had killed a man in that cavern, under circumstances that were, I believe, revolting even to the honour of these bandits. He sat there between the shadow of his murder and the reality of the vengeance. I asked myself what could

be the outcome of a struggle with him. He was armed; he was not weakened by hunger; but he stood between us and the water. My thirst would give me strength; the desire to end Seraphina's sufferings would make me invincible. On the other hand, it was dangerous to interfere. I could not tell whether they would not try to find out what became of him. It was safest to let him go. It was extremely improbable that they would sail without him.

I am not conscious of having stirred a limb; neither had Seraphina moved, I am ready to swear; but plainly something, some sort of sound, startled him. He bounded out of his seated immobility, and in one leap had his shoulders against the rock standing at bay before the darkness, with his knife in his hand. I wonder he did not surprise me into an exclamation. I was as startled as himself. His teeth and the whites of his eyes gleamed straight at me from afar; he hissed with fear; for an instant I was firmly convinced he had seen me. All this took place so quickly that I had no time to make one movement towards receiving his attack, when I saw him make a great sign of the cross in the air with the point of his dagger.

He sheathed it slowly, and sidled along the few feet to the entrance, his shoulders rubbing the wall. He blocked out the light, and in a moment had backed out of sight.

Before he got to the further end I was already, at the inner, creeping after him. I had started at once, as if his disappearance had removed a spell, as though he had drawn me after him by an invisible bond. Raising myself on my forearms I saw him, from his knees up, standing outside the sill, with his back to the precipice and his face turned up.

"There is nobody in there," he shouted.

I sank down and wriggled forward on my stomach, raising myself on my elbows, now and then, to look. Manuel was looking upwards conversing with the people above, and holding Williams' flask in both his hands. He never once glanced into the passage; he seemed to be trying to undo the cord knotted to the end of the thick rope, which hung in a long bight before him. The flask captured my eyes, my thought, my energy. I would tear it away from him directly. There was in me, then, neither fear nor intelligence; only the desire of possessing myself of the thing; but an instinctive caution prevented my rushing out violently. I proceeded with an animal-like stealthiness, with which cool reason had nothing to do.

He had some difficulty with the knot, and evidently did not wish to cut the green silk cord. How well I remember his fumbling fingers. He sat down sideways on the sill, with his legs outside, of course, his face and hands turned to the light, very

absorbed in his endeavour. They shouted to him from above.

"I come at once," he cried to them, without lifting his head.

I had crept up almost near enough to grab the flask. It never occurred to me that by flinging myself on him, I could have pushed him off the sill. My only idea was to get hold. He did not exist for me. The leather-covered bottle was the only real thing in the world. I was completely insane. I heard a faint detonation, and Manuel got up quickly from the sill. The flask was out of my reach.

There were more popping sounds of shots fired, away on the plain. The peons were attacking an outpost of the Lugareños. A deep voice cried, "They are driving them in." Then several together yelled:

"Come away, Manuel. Come away. Por Dios...."

Stretched at full length in the passage, and sustaining myself on my trembling arms, I gazed up at him. He stood very rigid, holding the flask in both hands. Several muskets were discharged together just above, and in the noise of the reports I remember a voice crying urgently over the edge, "Manuel! Manuel!" The shadow of irresolution passed over his features. He hesitated whether to run up the ledge or bolt into the cave. He shouted something. He was not answered, but the yelling and the firing ceased suddenly, as if the Lugareños had given up and taken to their heels. I became aware of a sort of increasing throbbing sound that seemed to come from behind me, out of the cave; then, as Manuel lifted his foot hastily to step over the sill, I jumped up deliriously, and with outstretched hands lurched forward at the flask in his fingers.

I believe I laughed at him in an imbecile manner.

Somebody laughed; and I remember the superior smile on his face passing into a ghastly grin, that disappeared slowly, while his astonished eyes, glaring at that gaunt and dishevelled apparition rising before him in the dusk of the passage, seemed to grow to an enormous size. He drew back his foot, as though it had been burnt; and in a panic-stricken impulse, he flung the flask straight into my face, and staggered away from the sill.

I made a catch at it with a scream of triumph, whose unearthly sound brought me back to my senses.

"In the name of God, retire," he cried, as though I had been an apparition from another world.

What took place afterwards happened with an inconceivable rapidity, in less time than it takes to draw breath. He never recognized me. I saw his glare of incredulous awe change, suddenly, to horror and despair. He had felt himself losing his balance.

He had stepped too far back. He tried to recover himself, but it was too late. He hung for a moment in his backward fall; his arms beat the air, his body curled upon itself with an awful striving. All at once he went limp all over, and, with the sunlight full upon his upturned face, vanished downwards from my sight.

But at the last moment he managed to clutch the bight of the hanging rope. The end of it must have been lying quite loose on the ground above, for I saw its whole length go whizzing after him, in the twinkling of an eye. I pressed the flask fiercely to my breast, raging with the thought that he could yet tear it out of my hands; but by the time the strain came, his falling body had acquired such a velocity that I didn't feel the slightest jerk when the green cord snapped--no more than if it had been the thread of a cobweb.

I confess that tears, tears of gratitude, were running down my face. My limbs trembled. But I was sane enough not to think of myself any more.

"Drink! Drink," I stammered, raising Seraphina's head on my shoulder, while the galloping horses of the peons in hot pursuit passed with a thundering rumble above us. Then all was still.

Our getting out of the cave was a matter of unremitting toil, through what might have been a year of time; the recollection is of an arduous undertaking, accomplished without the usual incentives of men's activity. Necessity, alone, remained; the iron necessity without the glamour of freedom of choice, of pride.

Our unsteady feet crushed, at last, the black embers of the fires scattered by the hoofs of horses; and the plain appeared immense to our weakness, swept of shadows by the high sun, lonely and desolate as the sea. We looked at the litter of the Lugareños' camp, rags on the trodden grass, a couple of abandoned blankets, a musket thrown away in the panic, a dirty red sash lying on a heap of sticks, a wooden bucket from the schooner, smashed water-gourds. One of them remained miraculously poised on its round bottom and full to the brim, while everything else seemed to have been overturned, torn, scattered haphazard by a furious gust of wind. A scaffolding of poles, for drying strips of meat, had been knocked over; I found nothing there except bits of hairy hide; but lumps of scorched flesh adhered to the white bones scattered amongst the ashes of the camp--and I thanked God for them.

We averted our eyes from our faces in very love, and we did not speak from pity for each other. There was no joy in our escape, no relief, no sense of freedom. The Lugareños and the peons, the pursued and the pursuers, had disappeared from the upland without leaving as much as a corpse in view. There were no moving things on the earth, no bird soared in the pellucid air, not even a moving cloud on the sky. The sun declined, and the rolling expanse of the plain frightened us, as if space had been something alive and hostile.

We walked away from that spot, as if our feet had been shod in lead; and we hugged the edge of the cruel ravine, as one keeps by the side of a friend. We must have been grotesque, pathetic, and lonely; like two people newly arisen from a tomb, shrinking before the strangeness of the half-forgotten face of the world. And at the head of the ravine we stopped.

The sensation of light, vastness, and solitude, rolled upon our souls emerging from the darkness, overwhelmingly, like a wave of the sea. We might have been an only couple sent back from the underworld to begin another cycle of pain on a depopulated earth. It had not for us even the fitful caress of a breeze; and the only sound of greeting was the angry babble of the brook dashing down the stony slope at our feet.

We knelt over it to drink deeply and bathe our faces. Then looking about helplessly, I discovered afar the belt of the sea inclosed between the undulating lines of the dunes and the straight edge of the horizon. I pointed my arm at the white sails of the schooner creeping from under the land, and Seraphina, resting her head on my shoulder, shuddered.

"Let us go away from here."

Our necessity pointed down the slope. We could not think of another way, and the extent of the plain with its boundary of forests filled us with the dread of things unknown. But, by getting down to the inlet of the sea, and following the bank of the little river, we were sure to reach the hacienda, if only a hope could buoy our sinking hearts long enough.

From our first step downwards the hard, rattling noise of the stones accompanied our descent, growing in volume, bewildering our minds. We had missed the indistinct beginning of the trail on the side of the ravine, and had to follow the course of the stream. A growth of wiry bushes sprang thickly between the large fragments of fallen rocks. On our right the shadows were beginning to steal into the chasm. Towering on our left the great stratified wall caught at the top of the glow of the low sun in a rich, tawny tint, right under the dark blue strip of sky, that seemed to reflect the gloom of the ravine, the sepulchral arid gloom of deep

shadows and gray rocks, through which the shallow torrent dashed violently with glassy gleams between the sombre masses of vegetation.

We pushed on through the bunches of tough twigs; the massive boulders closed the view on every side; and Seraphina followed me with her hands on my shoulders. This was the best way in which I could help her descent till the declivity became less steep; and then I went ahead, forcing a path for her. Often we had to walk into the bed of the stream. It was icy cold. Some strange beast, perhaps a bird, invisible somewhere, emitted from time to time a faint and lamentable shriek. It was a wild scene, and the orifice of the cave appeared as an inaccessible black hole some ninety feet above our heads.

Then, as I stepped round a large fragment of rock, my eyes fell on Manuel's body.

Seraphina was behind me. With a wave of my hand I arrested her. It had not occurred to me before that, following the bottom of the ravine, we must come upon the two bodies. Castro's was lower down, of course. I would have spared her the sight, but there was no retracing our steps. We had no strength and no time. Manuel was lying on his back with his hands under him, and his feet nearly in the brook.

The lower portion of the rope made a heap of cordage on the ground near him, but a great length of it hung perpendicularly above his head. The loose end he had snatched over the edge of his fall had whipped itself tight round the stem of a dwarf tree growing in a crevice high up the rock; and as he fell below, the jerk must have checked his descent, and had prevented him from alighting on his head. There was not a sign of blood anywhere upon him or on the stones. His eyes were shut. He might have lain down to sleep there, in our way; only from the slightly unnatural twist in the position of his arms and legs, I saw, at a glance, that all his limbs were broken.

On the other side of the boulder Seraphina called to me, and I could not answer her, so great was the shock I received in seeing the flutter of his slowly opening eyelids.

He still lived, then! He looked at me! It was an awful discovery to make, and the contrast of his anxious and feverish stare with the collapsed posture of his body was full of intolerable suggestions of fate blundering unlawfully, of death itself being conquered by pain. I looked away only to perceive something pitiless, belittling, and cruel in the precipitous immobility of the sheer walls, in the dark funereal green of the foliage, in the falling shadows, in the remoteness of the sky.

The unconsciousness of matter hinted at a weird and mysterious antagonism. All

the inanimate things seemed to have conspired to throw in our way this man just enough alive to feel pain. The faint and lamentable sounds we had heard must have come from him. He was looking at me. It was impossible to say whether he saw anything at all. He barred our road with his remnant of life; but, when suddenly he spoke, my heart stood still for a moment in my motionless body.

"You, too!" he droned awfully. "Behold! I have been precipitated, alive, into this hell by another ghost. Nothing else could have overcome the greatness of my spirit."

His red shirt was torn open at the throat. His bared breast began to heave. He cried out with pain. Ready to fly from him myself, I shouted to Seraphina to keep away.

But it was too late. Imagining I had seen some new danger in our path, she had advanced to stand by my side.

"He is dying," I muttered in distraction. "We can do nothing."

But could we pass him by before he died? "This is terrible," said Seraphina.

My real hope had been that, after driving the Lugareños away, the peons would off-saddle near the little river to rest themselves and their horses. This is why I had almost pitilessly hurried Seraphina, after we had left the cave, down the steep but short descent of the ravine. I had kept to myself my despairing conviction that we could never reach the hacienda unaided, even if we had known the way. I had pretended confidence in ourselves, but all my trust was in the assistance I expected to get from these men. I understood so well the slenderness of that hope that I had not dared to mention it to her and to propose she should wait for me on the upland, while I went down by myself on that quest. I could not bear the fear of returning unsuccessful only to find her dead. That is, if I had the strength to return after such a disappointment.

And the idea of her, waiting for me in vain, then wandering off, perhaps to fall under a bush and die alone, was too appalling to contemplate. That we must keep together, at all costs, was like a point of honour, like an article of faith with us--confirmed by what we had gone through already. It was like a law of existence, like a creed, like a defence which, once broken, would let despair upon our heads. I am sure she would not have consented to even a temporary separation. She had a sort of superstitious feeling that, should we be forced apart, even to the manifest saving of our lives, we would lay ourselves open to some calamity worse than mere death could be.

I loved her enough to share that feeling, but with the addition of a man's half-unconscious selfishness. I needed her indomitable frailness to prop my grosser strength. I needed that something not wholly of this world, which women's more exalted nature infuses into their passions, into their sorrows, into their joys; as if their adventurous souls had the power to range beyond the orbit of the earth for the gathering of their love, their hate--and their charity.

"He calls for death," she said, shrinking with horror and pity before the mutters of the miserable man at our feet. Every moment of daylight was of the utmost importance, if we were to save our freedom, our happiness, our very lives; and we remained rooted to the spot. For it seemed as though, at last, he had attained the end of his enterprise. He had captured us, as if by a very cruel stratagem.

A drowsiness would come at times over those big open eyes, like a film through which a blazing glance would break out now and then. He had recognized us perfectly; but, for the most part, we seemed to him to be the haunting ghosts of his inferno.

"You came from heaven," he raved feebly, rolling his straining eyes towards Seraphina. His internal injuries must have been frightful. Perhaps he dared not shift his head--the only movement that was in his power. "I reached up to the very angels in the inspiration of my song," he droned, "and would be called a demon on earth. Manuel el Demonio. And now precipitated alive.... Nothing less. There is a greatness in me. Let some dew fall upon my lips."

He moaned from the very bottom of his heart. His teeth chattered.

"The blessed may not know anything of the cold and thirst of this place. A drop of dew--as on earth you used to throw alms to the poor from your coach--for the love of God."

She sank on the stones nearer to him than I would willingly have done, brave as a woman, only, can be before the atrocious depths of human misery. I leaned my shoulders against the boulder and crossed my arms on my breast, as if giving up an unequal struggle. Her hair was loose, her dress stained with ashes, torn by brambles; the darkness of the cavern seemed to linger in her hollow cheeks, in her sunken temples.

"He is thirsty," she murmured to me.

"Yes," I said.

She tore off a strip of her dress, dipped it in the running water at her side, and

approached it, all dripping, to his lips which closed upon it with avidity. The walls of the rock looked on implacably, but the rushing stream seemed to hurry away, as if from an accursed spot.

"Dew from heaven," he sighed out.

"You are on earth, Manuel," she said. "You are given time to repent. This is earth."

"Impossible," he muttered with difficulty.

He had forced his human fellowship upon us, this man whose ambition it had been to be called demon on the earth. He held us by the humanity of his broken frame, by his human glance, by his human voice. I wonder if, had I been alone, I would have passed on as reason dictated, or have had the courage of pity and finished him off, as he demanded. Whenever he became aware of our presence, he addressed me as "Thou, English ghost," and directed me, in a commanding voice, to take a stone and crush his head, before I went back to my own torments. I withdrew, at last, where he could not see me; but Seraphina never flinched in her task of moistening his lips with the strip of cloth she dipped in the brook, time after time, with a sublime perseverance of compassion.

It made me silent. Could I have stood there and recited the sinister detail of that man's crimes, in the hope that she would recoil from him to pursue the road of safety? It was not his evil, but his suffering that confronted us now. The sense of our kinship emerged out of it like a fresh horror after we had escaped the sea, the tempest; after we had resisted untold fatigues, hunger, thirst, despair. We were vanquished by what was in us, not in him. I could say nothing. The light ebbed out of the ravine. The sky, like a thin blue veil stretched between the earth and the spaces of the universe, filtered the gloom of the darkness beyond.

I thought of the invisible sun ready to set into the sea, of the peons riding away, and of our helpless, hopeless state.

"For the love of God," he mumbled.

"Yes, for the love of God," I heard her expressionless voice repeat. And then there was only the greedy sound of his lips sucking at the cloth, and the impatient ripple of the stream.

"Come, death," he sighed.

Yes, come, I thought, to release him and to set us free. All my prayer, now, was

that we should be granted the strength to struggle from under the malignant frown of these crags, to close our eyes forever in the open.

And the truth is that, had we gone on, we should have found no one by the sea. The routed Lugareños had been able to embark under cover of a fusillade from those on board the schooner. All that would have met our despair, at the end of our toilsome march, would have been three dead pirates lying on the sand. The main body of the peons had gone, already, up the valley of the river with their few wounded. There would have been nothing for us to do but to stumble on and on upon their track, till we lay down never to rise again. They did not draw rein once, between the sea and the hacienda, sixteen miles away.

About the time when we began our descent into the ravine, two of the peons, detached from the main body for the purpose of observing the schooner from the upland, had topped the edge of the plain. We had then penetrated into Manuel's inferno, too deep to be seen by them. These men spent some time lying on the grass, and watching over the dunes the course of the schooner on the open sea. Their horses were grazing near them. The wind was light; they waited to see the vessel far enough down the coast to make any intention of return improbable.

It was Manuel who saved our lives, defeating his own aim to the bitter end. Had not his vanity, policy, or the necessity of his artistic soul, induced him to enter the cave; had not his cowardice prevented him joining the Lugareños above, at the moment of the attack; had he not recoiled violently in a superstitious fear before my apparition at the mouth of the cave--we should have been released from our entombment, only to look once more at the sun. He paid the price of our ransom, to the uttermost farthing, in his lingering death. Had he killed himself on the spot, he would have taken our only slender chance with him into that nether world where he imagined himself to have been "precipitated alive." Finding him dead, we should have gone on. Less than ten minutes, no more than another ten paces beyond the spot, we should have been hidden from sight in the thickets of denser growth in the lower part of the ravine. I doubt whether we should have been able to get through; but, even so, we should have been going away from the only help within our reach. We should have been lost.

The two vaqueros, after seeing the schooner hull down under the low, fiery sun of the west, mounted and rode home over the plain, making for the head of the ravine, as their way lay. And, as they cantered along the side opposite to the cave, one of them caught sight of the length of rope dangling down the precipice. They pulled up at once.

The first I knew of their nearness was the snorting of a horse forced towards the edge of the chasm. I saw the animal's forelegs planted tensely on the very brink,

and the body of the rider leaning over his neck to look down. And, when I wished to shout, I found I could not produce the slightest sound.

The man, rising in his stirrups, the reins in one hand and turning up the brim of his sombrero with the other, peered down at us over the pricked ears of his horse. I pointed over my head at the mouth of the cave, then down at Seraphina, lifting my hands to show that I was unarmed. I opened my lips wide. Surprise, agitation, weakness, had robbed me of every vestige of my voice. I beckoned downwards with a desperate energy, Horse and rider remained perfectly still, like an equestrian statue set up on the edge of a precipice. Sera-phina had never raised her head.

The man's intent scrutiny could not have mistaken me for a Lugareno. I think he gazed so long because he was amazed to discover down there a woman on her knees, stooping over a prostrate body, and a bareheaded man in a ragged white shirt and black breeches, reeling between the bushes and gesticulating violently, like an excited mute. But how a rope came to hang down from a tree, growing in a position so inaccessible that only a bird could have attached it there struck him as the most mysterious thing of all. He pointed his finger at it interrogatively, and I answered this inquiring sign by indicating the stony slope of the ravine. It seemed as if he could not speak for wonder. After a while he sat back in his saddle, gave me an encouraging wave of the hand, and wheeled his horse away from the brink.

It was as if we had been casting a spell of extinction on each other's voices. No sooner had he disappeared than I found mine. I do not suppose it was very loud but, at my aimless screech, Seraphina looked upwards on every side, saw no one anywhere, and remained on her knees with her eyes, full of apprehension, fixed upon me.

"No! I am not mad, dearest," I said. "There was a man. He has seen us."

"Oh, Juan!" she faltered out, "pray with me that God may have mercy on this poor wretch and let him die."

I said nothing. My thin, quavering scream after the peon had awakened Manuel from his delirious dream of an inferno. The voice that issued from his shattered body was awfully measured, hollow, and profound.

"You live!" he uttered slowly, turning his eyes full upon my face, and, as if perceiving for the first time in me the appearance of a living man. "Ha! You English walk the earth unscathed."

A feeling of pity came to me--a pity distinct from the harrowing sensations of his miserable end. He had been evil in the obscurity of his life, as there are plants growing harmful and deadly in the shade, drawing poison from the dank soil on which they flourish. He was as unconscious of his evil as they--but he had a man's right to my pity.

"I am b--roken," he stammered out.

Seraphina kept on moistening his lips.

"Repent, Manuel," she entreated fervently. "We have forgiven thee the evil done to us. Repent of thy crimes--poor man."

"Your voice, Señorita. What? You! You yourself bringing this blessing to my lips! In your childhood I cried 'viva' many times before your coach. And now you deign--in your voice--with your hand. Ha! I could improvise--The star stoops to the crushed worm...."

A rising clatter of rolling stones mingled from afar with the broken moanings of his voice. Looking over my shoulder, I saw one peon beginning the descent of the slope, and, higher up, motionless between the heads of two horses, the head of another man--with the purple tint of an enlarged sky beyond, reflecting the glow of an invisible sun setting into the sea.

Manuel cried out piercingly, and we shuddered. Seraphina shrank close to my side, hiding her head on my breast. The peon staggered awkwardly down the slope, descending sideways in small steps, embarrassed by the enormous rowels of his spurs. He had a striped serape over his shoulder, and grasped a broad-bladed machete in his right hand. His stumbling, cautious feet sent into the ravine a crashing sound, as though we were to be buried under a stream of stones.

"Vuestra Señoría" gasped Manuel. "I shall be silent. Pity me! Do not--do not withdraw your hand from my extreme pain."

I felt she had to summon all her courage to look at him again. She disengaged herself, resolutely, from my enfolding arms.

"No, no; unfortunate man," she said, in a benumbed voice. "Think of thy end."

"A crushed worm, señorita," he mumbled.

The peon, having reached the bottom of the slope, became lost to view amongst

the bushes and the great fragments of rocks below. Every sound in the ravine was hushed; and the darkening sky seemed to cast the shadow of an everlasting night into the eyes of the dying man.

Then the peon came out, pushing through, in a great swish of parted bushes. His spurs jingled at every step, his footfalls crunched heavily on the pebbles. He stopped, as if transfixed, muttering his astonishment to himself, but asking no questions. He was a young man with a thin black moustache twisted gallantly to two little points. He looked up at the sheer wall of the precipice; he looked down at the group we formed at his feet. Suddenly, as if returning from an abyss of pain, Manuel declared distinctly:

"I feel in me a greatness, an inspiration...."

These were his last words. The heavy dark lashes descended slowly upon the faint gleam of the eyeballs, like a lowered curtain. The deep folds of the ravine gathered the falling dusk into great pools of absolute blackness, at the foot of the crags.

Rising high above our littleness, that watched, fascinated, the struggle of lights and shadows over the soul entangled in the wreck of a man's body, the rocks had a monumental indifference. And between their great, stony faces, turning pale in the gloom, with the amazed peon as if standing guard, machete in hand, Manuel's greatness and his inspiration passed away without as much as an exhaled sigh. I did not even know that he had ceased to breathe, till Seraphina rose from her knees with a low cry, and flung far away from her, nervously, the strip of cloth upon which his parted lips had refused to close.

My arms were ready to receive her. "Ah! At last!" she cried. There was something resentful and fierce in that cry, as though the pity of her woman's heart had been put to too cruel a test.

I, too, had been humane to that man. I had had his life on the end of my pistol, and had spared him from an impulse that had done nothing but withhold from him the mercy of a speedy death. This had been my pity.

But it was Seraphina's cry--this "At last," showing the stress and pain of the ordeal--that shook my faith in my conduct. It had brought upon our heads a retribution of mental and bodily anguish, like a criminal weakness. I was young, and my belief in the justice of life had received a shock. If it were impossible to foretell the consequences of our acts, if there were no safety in the motives within ourselves, what remained for our guidance?

And the inscrutable immobility of towering forms, steeped in the shadows of the chasm, appeared pregnant with a dreadful wisdom. It seemed to me that I would never have the courage to lift my hand, open my lips, make a step, obey a thought. A long sun-ray shot to the zenith from the beclouded west, crossing obliquely in a faint red bar the purple band of sky above the ravine.

The young vaquero had taken off his hat before the might of death, and made a perfunctory sign of the cross. He looked up and down the lofty wall, as if it could give him the word of that riddle. Twice his spurs clashed softly, and, with one hand grasping the rope, he stooped low in the twilight over the body.

"We looked for this Lugareño," he said, replacing his hat on his head carelessly. "He was a mad singer, and I saw him once kill one of us very swiftly. They used to call him in jest, El Demonio. Ah! But you... But you...."

His wonder overcame him. His bewildered eyes glimmered, staring at us in the deepening dusk.

"Speak, hombre," he cried. "Who are you and who is she? Whence came you? Where are you going with this woman?..."