

CHAPTER THREE

The first decent word I had spoken to me after that for months came from my turnkey at Newgate. It was when he welcomed me back from my examination before the Thames Court magistrate. The magistrate, a bad-tempered man, snuffy, with red eyes, and the air of being a piece of worn and dirty furniture of his court, had snapped at me when I tried to speak:

"Keep your lies for the Admiralty Session. I've only time to commit you. Damn your Spaniards; why can't they translate their own papers;" had signed something with a squeaky quill, tossed it to his clerk, and grunted, "Next case."

I had gone back to Newgate.

The turnkey, a man with the air of an innkeeper, bandy-legged, with a bulbous, purple-veined nose and watering eyes, slipped out of the gatehouse door, whilst the great, hollow-sounding gate still shook behind me. He said:

"If you hurries up you'll see a bit of life.... Do you good. Condemned sermon. Being preached in the chapel now; sheriffs and all. They swing tomorrow--three of them. Quick with the stumps."

He hurried me over the desolate mossy-green cobbles of the great solitary yard into a square, tall, bare, whitewashed place. Already from the outside one caught a droning voice. There might have been three hundred people there, boxed off in pews, with turnkeys at each end. A vast king's arms, a splash of red and blue gilt, sprawled above a two-tiered pulpit that was like the trunk of a large broken tree. The turnkey pulled my hat off, and nudged me into a box beside the door.

"Kneel down," he whispered hoarsely.

I knelt. A man with a new wig was droning out words, waving his hands now and then from the top of the tall pulpit. Beneath him a smaller man in an old wig was dozing, his head bent forward. The place was dirty, and ill-lighted by the tall, grimy windows, heavily barred. A pair of candles flickered beside the preacher's right arm....

"They that go down to the sea in ships, my poor brethren," he droned, "lying under the shadow..."

He directed his hands towards a tall deal box painted black, isolated in the centre

of the lower floor. A man with a red head sat in it, his arms folded; another had his arms covering his head, which leant abjectly forward on the rail in front. There were large rusty gyves upon his wrists.

"But observe, my poor friends," the chaplain droned on, "the psalmist saith, 'At the last He shall bring them unto the desired haven.' Now..."

The turnkey whispered suddenly into my ear: "Them's the condemned he's preaching at, them in the black pew. See Roguey Cullen wink at the woman prisoners up there in the gallery.... Him with the red hair.... All swings to-morrow."

"After they have staggered and reeled to and fro, and been amazed... observe. After they have been tempted; even after they have fallen...."

The sheriffs had their eyes decorously closed. The clerk reached up from below the preacher, and snuffed one of the candles. The preacher paused to rearrange his shining wig. Little clouds of powder flew out where he touched it. He struck his purple velvet cushion, and continued:

"At the last, I say, He shall bring them to the haven they had desired."

A jarring shriek rose out of the black pew, and an insensate jangling of irons rattled against the hollow wood. The ironed man, whose head had been hidden, was writhing in an epileptic fit. The governor began signalling to the jailers, and the whole dismal assembly rose to its feet, and craned to get a sight. The jailers began hurrying them out of the building. The redheaded man was crouching in the far corner of the black box.

The turnkey caught the end of my sleeve, and hurried me out of the door.

"Come away," he said. "Come out of it.... Damn my good nature."

We went swiftly through the tall, gloomy, echoing stone passages. All the time there was the noise of the prisoners being marshalled somewhere into their distant yards and cells. We went across the bottom of a well, where the weeping December light struck ghastly down on to the stones, into a sort of rabbit-warren of black passages and descending staircases, a horror of cold, solitude, and night. Iron door after iron door clanged to behind us in the stony blackness. After an interminable traversing, the turnkey, still with his hand on my sleeve, jerked me into my familiar cell. I hadn't thought to be glad to get back to that dim, frozen, damp-chilled little hole; with its hateful stone walls, stone ceiling, stone floor, stone bed-slab, and stone table; its rope mat, foul stable-blanket, its horrible

sense of eternal burial, out of sound, out of sight under a mined mountain of black stones. It was so tiny that the turnkey, entering after me, seemed to be pressed close up to my chest, and so dark that I could not see the colour of the dirty hair that fell matted from the bald patch on the top of his skull; so familiar that I knew the feel of every little worming of rust on the iron candlestick. He wiped his face with a brown rag of handkerchief, and said:

"Curse me if ever I go into that place again." After a time he added: "Unless 'tis a matter of duty."

I didn't say anything; my nerves were still jangling to that shrieking, and to the clang of the iron doors that had closed behind me. I had an irresistible impulse to get hold of the iron candlestick and smash it home through the skull of the turnkey--as I had done to the men who had killed Seraphina's father... to kill this man, then to creep along the black passages and murder man after man beside those iron doors until I got to the open air.

He began again. "You'd think we'd get used to it--you'd think we would--but 'tis a strain for us. You never knows what the prisoners will do at a scene like that there. It drives 'em mad. Look at this scar. Machell the forger done that for me, 'fore he was condemned, after a sermon like that--a quiet, gentlemanly man, much like you. Lord, yes, 'tis a strain..." He paused, still wiping his face, then went on: "And I swear that when I sees them men sit there in that black pew, an' hev heard the hammers going clack, clack on the scaffolding outside, and knew that they hadn't no more chance than you have to get out of there..." He pointed his short thumb towards the handkerchief of an opening, where the little blurr of blue light wavered through the two iron frames crossed in the nine feet of well. "Lord, you never gets used to it. You wants them to escape; 'tis in the air through the whole prison, even the debtors. I tells myself again and again, 'You're a fool for your pains.' But it's the same with the others--my mates. You can't get it out of your mind. That little kid now. I've seen children swing; but that little kid--as sure to swing as what... as what you are...."

"You think I am going to swing?" I asked.

I didn't want to kill him any more; I wanted too much to hear him talk. I hadn't heard anything for months and months of solitude, of darkness--on board the admiral's ship, stranded in the guardship at Plymouth, bumping round the coast, and now here in Newgate. And it had been darkness all the time. Jove! That Cuban time, with its movements, its pettiness, its intrigue, its warmth, even its villainies showed plainly enough in the chill of that blackness. It had been romance, that life.

Little, and far away, and irrevocably done with, it showed all golden. There wasn't any romance where I lay then; and there had been irons on my wrists; gruff hatred, the darkness, and always despair.

On board the flagship coming home I had been chained down in the cable-tier--a place where I could feel every straining of the great ship. Once these had risen to a pandemonium, a frightful tumult. There was a great gale outside. A sailor came down with a lanthorn, and tossed my biscuit to me.

"You d-----d pirate," he said, "maybe it's you saving us from drowning."

"Is the gale very bad?" I had called.

He muttered--and the fact that he spoke to me at all showed how great the strain of the weather must have been to wring any words out of him:

"Bad--there's a large Indiaman gone. We saw her one minute and then..." He went away, muttering.

And suddenly the thought had come to me. What if the Indiaman were the Lion--the Lion with Seraphina on board? The man would not speak to me when he came again. No one would speak to me; I was a pirate who had fired on his own countrymen. And the thought had pursued me right into Newgate--if she were dead; if I had taken her from that security, from that peace, to end there.... And to end myself.

"Swing!" the turnkey said; "you'll swing right enough." He slapped the great key on his flabby hand. "You can tell that by the signs. You, being an Admiralty case, ought to have been in the Marshalsea. And you're ordered solitary cell, and I'm tipped the straight wink against your speaking a blessed word to a blessed soul. Why don't they let you see an attorney? Why? Because they mean you to swing."

I said, "Never mind that. Have you heard of a ship called the Lion? Can you find out about her?"

He shook his head cunningly, and did not answer. If the Lion had been here, I must have heard. They couldn't have left me here.

I said, "For God's sake find out. Get me a shipping gazette."

He affected not to hear.

"There's money in plenty," I said.

He winked ponderously and began again. "Oh, you'll swing all right. A man with nothing against him has a chance; with the rhino he has it, even if he's guilty. But you'll swing. Charlie, who brought you back just now, had a chat with the 'Torney-General's devil's clerk's clerk, while old Nog o' Bow Street was trying to read their Spanish. He says it's a Gov'nment matter. They wants to hang you bad, they do, so's to go to the Jacky Spaniards and say, 'He were a nob, a nobby nob.' (So you are, aren't you? One uncle an earl and t'other a dean, if so be what they say's true.) 'He were a nobby nob and we swung 'im. Go you'n do likewise.' They want a striking example t' keep the West India trade quiet..." He wiped his forehead and moved my water jug of red earth on the dirty deal table under the window, for all the world like a host in front of a guest. "They means you to swing," he said. "They've silenced the Thames Court reporters. Not a noospaper will publish a correct report t'morrer. And you haven't see nobody, nor you won't, not if I can help it."

He broke off and looked at me with an expression of candour.

"Mind you," he said, "I'm not uffish. To 'n ornery gentleman--of the road or what you will--I'm not, if so be he's the necessary. I'd take a letter like another. But for you, no--fear. Not that I've my knife into you. What I can do to make you comfor'ble I will do, both now an' hereafter. But when I gets the wink, I looks after my skin. So'd any man. You don't see nobody, nor you won't; nor your nobby relations won't have the word. Till the Hadmir'lty trile. Charlie says it's unconstitutional, you ought to see your 'torney, if you've one, or your father's got one. But Lor', I says, 'Charlie, if they wants it they gets it. This ain't no habeas carpis, give-the-man-a-chance case. It's the Hadmir'lty. And not a man tried for piracy this thirty year. See what a show it gives them, what bloody Radicle knows or keeres what the perceedin's should be? Who's a-goin' t' make a question out of it? Go away,' says I to Charlie. And that's it straight."

He went towards the door, then turned.

"You should be in the Marshalsea common yard; even I knows that. But they've the wink there. 'Too full,' says they. Too full be d-----d. I've know'd the time--after the Vansdell smash it were--when they found room for three hundred more improvident debtors over and above what they're chartered for. Too full! Their common yard! They don't want you to speak to a soul, an' you won't till this day week, when the Hadmir'lty Session is in full swing." He went out and locked the door, snorting, "Too full at the Marshalsea!... Go away!"

"Find out about the Lion," I called, as the door closed.

It cleared the air for me, that speech. I understood that they wanted to hang me, and I wanted not to be hung, desperately, from that moment. I had not much cared before; I had--call it, moped. I had not really believed, really sensed it out. It isn't easy to conceive that one is going to be hanged, I doubt if one does even with the rope round one's neck. I hadn't much wanted to live, but now I wanted to fight--one good fight before I went under for good and all, condemned or acquitted. There wasn't anything left for me to live for, Seraphina could not be alive. The Lion must have been lost.

But I was going to make a fight for it; curse it, I was going to give them trouble. My "them" was not so much the Government that meant to hang me as the unseen powers that suffered such a state of things, that allowed a number of little meannesses, accidents, fatalities, to hang me. I began to worry the turnkey. He gave me no help, only shreds of information that let me see more plainly than ever how set "they" were on sacrificing me to their exigencies.

The whole West Indian trade in London was in an uproar over the Pirate Question and over the Slave Question. Jamaica was still squealing for Separation before the premonitory grumbles of Abolition. Horton Pen, over there, came back with astonishing clearness before me. I seemed to hear old, wall-eyed, sandy-headed Macdonald, agitating his immense bulk of ill-fitting white clothes in front of his newspaper, and bellowing in his ox-voice:

"Abolition, they give us Abolition... or ram it down our throats. They who haven't even the spunk to rid us o' the d-----d pirates, not the spunk to catch and hang one.... Jock, me lahd, we's abolush them before they sail touch our neegurs.... Let them clear oor seas, let them hang one pirate, and then talk."

I was the one they were going to hang, to consolidate the bond with the old island. The cement wanted a little blood in the mixing. Damn them! I was going to make a fight; they had torn me from Seraphina, to fulfill their own accursed ends. I felt myself grow harsh and strong, as a tree feels itself grow gnarled by winter storms. I said to the turnkey again and again:

"Man, I will promise you a thousand pounds or a pension for life, if you will get a letter through to my mother or Squire Rooksby of Horton."

He said he daren't do it; enough was known of him to hang him if he gave offence. His flabby fingers trembled, and his eyes grew large with successive shocks of cupidity. He became afraid of coming near me; of the strain of the temptation. On the next day he did not speak a word, nor the next, nor the next. I began to grow horribly afraid of being hung. The day before the trial arrived. Towards noon he flung the door open.

"Here's paper, here's pens," he said. "You can prepare your defence. You may write letters. Oh, hell! why did not they let it come sooner, I'd have had your thousand pounds. I'll run a letter down to your people fast as the devil could take it. I know a man, a gentleman of the road. For twenty pun promised, split between us, he'll travel faster'n Turpin did to York." He was waving a large sheet of newspaper agitatedly.

"What does it mean?" I asked. My head was whirling.

"Radical papers got a-holt of it," he said. "Trust them for nosing out. And the Government's answering them. They say you're going to suffer for your crimes. Hark to this... um, um... 'The wretched felon now in Newgate will incur the just penalty...' Then they slaps the West Indies in the face. 'When the planters threaten to recur to some other power for protection, they, of course, believe that the loss of the colonies would be severely felt. But...'"

"The Lion's home," I said.

It burst upon me that she was--that she must be. Williams--or Sebright--he was the man, had been speaking up for me. Or Seraphina had been to the Spanish ambassador.

She was back; I should see her. I started up.

"The Lion's home," I repeated.

The turnkey snarled, "She was posted as overdue three days ago."

I couldn't believe it was true.

"I saw it in the papers," he grumbled on. "I dursn't tell you." He continued violently, "Blow my dickey. It would make a cat sick."

My sudden exaltation, my sudden despair, gave way to indifference.

"Oh, coming, coming!" he shouted, in answer to an immense bellowing cry that loomed down the passage without.

I heard him grumble, "Of course, of course. I shan't make a penny." Then he caught hold of my arm. "Here, come along, someone to see you in the press-yard."

He pulled me along the noisome, black warren of passages, slamming the inner

door viciously behind him.

The press-yard--the exercising ground for the condemned--was empty; the last batch had gone out, my batch would be the next to come in, the turnkey said suddenly. It was a well of a place, high black walls going up into the desolate, weeping sky, and quite tiny. At one end was a sort of slit in the wall, closed with tall, immense windows. From there a faint sort of rabbit's squeak was going up through the immense roll and rumble of traffic on the other side of the wall. The turnkey pushed me towards it.

"Go on," he said. "I'll not listen; I ought to. But, curse me, I'm not a bad sort," he added gloomily; "I dare say you'll make it worth my while."

I went and peered through the bars at a faint object pressed against other bars in just another slit across a black passage.

"What, Jackie, boy; what, Jackie?" Blinking his eyes, as if the dim light were too strong for them, a thin, bent man stood there in a brilliant new court coat. His face was meagre in the extreme, the nose and cheekbones polished and transparent like a bigaroon cherry. A thin tuft of reddish hair was brushed back from his high, shining forehead. It was my father. He exclaimed:

"What, Jackie, boy! How old you look!" then waved his arm towards me. "In trouble?" he said. "You in trouble?"

He rubbed his thin hands together, and looked round the place with a cultured man's air of disgust. I said, "Father!" and he suddenly began to talk very fast and agitatedly of what he had been doing for me. My mother, he said, was crippled with rheumatism, and Rooksby and Veronica on the preceding Thursday had set sail for Jamaica. He had read to my mother, beside her bed, the newspaper containing an account of my case; and she had given him money, and he had started with violent haste for London. The haste and the rush were still dazing him. He had lived down there in the farmhouse beneath the downs, with the stackyards under his eyes, with his books of verse and his few prints on the wall-----My God, how it all came back to me.

In his disjointed speeches, I could see how exactly the same it all remained. The same old surly man with a squint had driven him along the muddy roads in the same ancient gig, past the bare elms, to meet the coach. And my father had never been in London since he had walked the streets with the Prince Regent's friends.

Whilst he talked to me there, lines of verse kept coming to his lips; and, after the habitual pleasure of the apt quotation, he felt acutely shocked at the

inappropriateness of the place, the press-yard, with the dim light weeping downwards between immensely high walls, and the desultory snowflakes that dropped between us. And he had tried so hard, in his emergency, to be practical. When he had reached London, before even attempting to see me, he had run from minister to minister trying to influence them in my favour--and he reached me in Newgate with nothing at all effected.

I seemed to know him then, so intimately, so much better than anything else in the world.

He began, "I had my idea in the up-coach last night. I thought, 'A very great personage was indebted to me in the old days (more indebted than you are aware of, Johnnie). I will intercede with him.' That was why my first step was to my old tailor's in Conduit Street. Because... what is fit for a farm for a palace were low." He stopped, reflected, then said, "What is fit for the farm for the palace were low."

He felt across his coat for his breast pocket. It was what he had done years and years ago, and all these years between, inscribe ideas for lines of verse in his pocket-book. I said:

"You have seen the king?"

His face lengthened a little. "Not seen him. But I found one of the duke's secretaries, a pleasant young fellow... not such as we used to be. But the duke was kind enough to interest himself. Perhaps my name has lived in the land. I was called Curricule Kemp, as I may have told you, because I drove a vermilion one with green and gilt wheels...."

His face, peering at me through the bars, had, for a moment, a flush of pride. Then he suddenly remembered, and, as if to propitiate his own reproof, he went on:

"I saw the Secretary of State, and he assured me, very civilly, that not even the highest personage in the land...." He dropped his voice, "Jackie, boy," he said, his narrow-lidded eyes peering miserably across at me, "there's not even hope of a reprieve afterwards."

I leaned my face wearily against the iron bars. What, after all, was the use of fighting if the Lion were not back?

Then, suddenly, as the sound of his words echoed down the bare, black corridors, he seemed to realize the horror of it. His face grew absolutely white, he held his head erect, as if listening to a distant sound. And then he began to cry--horribly,

and for a long time.

It was I that had to comfort him. His head had bowed at the conviction of his hopeless uselessness; all through his own life he had been made ineffectual by his indulgence in perfectly innocent, perfectly trivial enjoyments, and now, in this extremity of his only son, he was rendered almost fantastically of no avail.

"No, no, sir! You have done all that any one could; you couldn't break these walls down. Nothing else would help."

Small, hopeless sobs shook him continually. His thin, delicate white fingers gripped the black grille, with the convulsive grasp of a very weak man. It was more distressing to me than anything I had ever seen or felt. The mere desire, the intense desire to comfort him, made me get a grip upon myself again. And I remembered that, now that I could communicate with the outer air, it was absolutely easy; he would save my life. I said:

"You have only to go to Clapham, sir."

And the moment I was in a state to command him, to direct him, to give him something to do, he became a changed man. He looked up and listened. I told him to go to Major Cowper's. It would be easy enough to find him at Clapham. Cowper, I remembered, could testify to my having been seized by Tomas Castro. He had seen me fight on the decks. And what was more, he would certainly know the addresses of Kingston planters, if any were in London. They could testify that I had been in Jamaica all the while Nikola el Escoces was in Rio Medio. I knew there were some. My father was fidgeting to be gone. He had his name marked for him, and a will directing his own. He was not the same man. But I particularly told him to send me a lawyer first of all.

"Yes, yes!" he said, fidgeting to go, "to Major Cowper's. Let me write his address."

"And a solicitor," I said. "Send him to me on your way there."

"Yes, yes," he said, "I shall be able to be of use to the solicitor. As a rule, they are men of no great perspicacity."

And he went hurriedly away.

The real torture, the agony of suspense began then. I steadied my nerves by trying to draw up notes for my speech to the jury on the morrow. That was the turnkey's idea.

He said, "Slap your chest, 'peal to the honour of a British gent, and pitch it in strong."

It was not much good; I could not keep to any logical sequence of thought, my mind was forever wandering to what my father was doing. I pictured him in his new blue coat, running agitatedly through crowded streets, his coat-tails flying behind his thin legs. The hours dragged on, and it was a matter of minutes. I had to hold upon the table edge to keep myself from raging about the cell. I tried to bury myself again in the scheme for my defence. I wondered whom my father would have found. There was a man called Cary who had gone home from Kingston. He had a bald head and blue eyes; he must remember me. If he would corroborate! And the lawyer, when he came, might take another line of defence. It began to fall dusk slowly, through the small barred windows.

The entire night passed without a word from my father. I paced up and down the whole time, composing speeches to the jury. And then the day broke. I calmed myself with a sort of frantic energy.

Early the jailer came in, and began fussing about my cell.

"Case comes on about one," he said. "Grand jury at half after twelve. No fear they won't return a true bill. Grand jury, five West India merchants. They means to have you. 'Torney-General, S'lic'tor-General. S'r Robert Mead, and five juniors agin you... You take my tip. Throw yourself on the mercy of the court, and make a rousing speech with a young 'ooman in it. Not that you'll get much mercy from them. They Admir'lty jedges is all hangers. 'S we say, 'Oncet the anchor goes up in the Old Bailey, there ain't no hope. We begins to clean out the c'ndemned cell, here. Sticks the anchor up over their heads, when it is Hadmir'lty case," he commented.

I listened to him with strained attention. I made up my mind to miss not a word uttered that day. It was my only chance.

"You don't know any one from Jamaica?" I asked.

He shook his bullet head, and tapped his purple nose. "Can't be done," he said. "You'd get a ornery hallybi fer a guinea a head, but they'd keep out of this case. They've necks like you and me."

Whilst he was speaking, the whole of the outer world, as far as it affected me, came suddenly in upon me--that was what I meant to the great city that lay all round, the world, in the centre of which was my cell. To the great mass, I was matter for a sensation; to them I might prove myself beneficial in this business.

Perhaps there were others who were thinking I might be useful in one way or another. There were the ministers of the Crown, who did not care much whether Jamaica separated or not. But they wanted to hang me because they would be able to say disdainfully to the planters, "Separate if you like; we've done our duty, we've hanged a man."

All those people had their eyes on me, and they were about the only ones who knew of my existence. That was the end of my Romance! Romance! The broadsheet sellers would see to it afterwards with a "Dying confession."