

CHAPTER FIVE

I had shot my bolt and I was going to die; I could see it in the way the King's Advocate tossed his head back, fluttered his bands, looked at the jury-box, and began to play with the seals on his fob. The court had resumed its stillness. A man in some sort of livery passed a square paper to the Lord Mayor, the Lord Mayor passed it to Lord Stowell, who opened it with a jerking motion of an ancient fashion that impressed me immensely. It was as if I, there at the end of my life, were looking at a man opening a letter of the reign of Queen Anne. The shadows of his ancient, wrinkled face changed as he read, raising his eyebrows and puckering his mouth. He handed the unfolded paper to Mr. Baron Garrow, then with one wrinkled finger beckoned the Attorney-General to him. The third judge was still asleep.

"What the devil's this?" the turnkey beside me said to his companion.

I was in a good deal of pain, and felt sickly that every pulse of my heart throbbed in my mangled hand. The other spat straight in front of him.

"Damme if I know," he said. "This cursed business ought to have been over and done with an hour ago. I told Jinks to have my rarebit and noggin down by the gate-house fire at half-past five, and it's six now."

They began an interminable argument under their breaths.

"It's that wager of Lord March's... run a mile, walk a mile, eat five pounds of mutton, drink five pints of claret. No, it ain't.. Medmenham coach ain't in yet... roads too heavy.... It is. What else would stop the Court at this time of night? It isn't, or Justice Best 'd be awake and hedging his bets."

In a dizzy way I noted the Attorney-General making his way carefully back between the benches to his knot of barristers, and their wigs went all together in a bunch like ears of corn drawn suddenly into a sheaf. The heads of the other barristers were like unreaped ears. A man with a face like a weasel's called to a man with a face like a devil's--he was leaving the court--something about an ambassador. The other stopped, turned, and deposited his bag again. I heard the deep voice of Sir Robert Gifford say: "What!... Never!... too infamous..." and then the interest and the light seemed to flicker out together. I could hardly see. Voices called out to each other, harsh, dry, as if their owners had breathed nothing but dust for years and years.

One loud one barked, "You can't hear him, m'luds; in Rex v. Marsupenstein...."

A lot began calling all together, "Ah, but that was different, Mr. Attorney. You couldn't subpoena him, he being in the position of extra lege commune. But if he offers a statement...."

The candles seemed to be waving deliberately like elm-tops in a high wind.

Someone called, "Clerk, fetch me volume xiii.... I think we shall find there.... You recollect the case of Hildeshein v. Roe.... Wasn't it Hildegaulen and another, m'lud?"... "I tried the case myself. The Prussian Plenipotentiary...."

I wanted to call out to them that it was not worth while to try their dry throats any more; that having shot my bolt, I gave in. But I could not think of any words, I was so tired. "I didn't sleep at all last night," I found myself saying to myself.

The sleeping judge woke up suddenly and snarled, "Why in Heaven's name don't we get on? We shall be all night. Let him call the second name on the list. We can take the Spanish ambassador when you have settled. For my part I think we ought to hear him...."

Lord Stowell said suddenly, "Prisoner at the bar, some gentlemen have volunteered statements on your behalf. If you wish it, they can be called."

I didn't answer; I did not understand; I wanted to tell him I did not care, because the Lion was posted as overdue and Seraphina was drowned. The Court seemed to be moving slowly up and down in front of me like the deck of a ship. I thought I was bound again, and on the sofa in the gorgeous cabin of the Madre-de-Dios. Someone seemed to be calling, "Prisoner at the bar... Prisoner at the bar...." It was as if the candles had been lit in front of the Madonna with the pink child, only she had a gilt anchor instead of the spiky gilt glory above her head. Somebody was saying, "Hello there.... Hold up!... Here, bring a chair,..." and there were arms around me. Afterwards I sat down. A very old judge's voice said something rather kindly, I thought. I knew it was the very old judge, because he was called the star of Cuban law. Someone would be bending over me soon, with a lanthorn, and I should be wiping the flour out of my eyes and blinking at the red velvet and gilding of the cabin ceiling. In a minute Carlos and Castro would come... or was it O'Brien who would come? No, O'Brien was dead; stabbed, with a knife in his neck; the blood was still sticky between my first and second fingers. I could feel it. I ought to have been allowed to wash my hands before I was tried; or was it before I spoke to the admiral? One would not speak to a man with hands like that.

A loud, high-pitched voice called from up in the air, "I will give any of you gentlemen of the robe down there fifty pounds to conduct the remainder of the case for him. I am the prisoner's father."

My father's voice broke the spell. I was in the court; the candles were still burning; all the faces, lit up or in the shadow, were bunched together in little groups; hands waved. The barrister whose face was like the devil's under his wig held in his hands the paper that had been handed to Lord Stowell; my father was talking to him from the bench. The barrister, tall, his robes old and ragged, silhouetted against the light, glanced down the paper, fluttered it in his hand, nodded to my father, and began a grotesque, nasal drawl:

"M'luds, I will conduct the case for the prisoner, if your lordships will bear with me a little. He obviously can't call his own witnesses. If he has been treated as he says, it has been one of the most abominable..."

Old Lord Stowell said, "Ch't, ch't, Mr. Walker; you know you must not make a speech for the prisoner. Call your witness. It is all that is needed."

I wondered what he meant by that. The barrister was calling a man of the name of Williams. I seemed to know the name. I seemed to know the man, too.

"Owen Williams, Master of the ship Lion.... Coffee and dye-wood.... Just come in under a jury-rig. Had been dismasted and afterwards becalmed. Heard of this trial from the pilot in Graves-end. Had taken post-chaises..."

I only heard snatches of his answers.

"On the twenty-fifth of August last I was close in with the Cuban coast.... The mate, Sebright, got boiling water for them.... Afterwards a heavy fog. They boarded us in many boats...." He was giving all the old evidence over again, fastening another stone around my neck. But suddenly he said: "This gentleman came alongside in a leaky dinghy. A dead shot. He saved all our lives."

His bullet-head, the stare of his round blue eyes seemed to draw me out of a delirium. I called out:

"Williams, for God's sake, Williams, where is Seraphina? Did she come with you?" There was an immense roaring in my head, and the ushers were shouting, "Silence! Silence!" I called out again.

Williams was smiling idiotically; then he shook his head and put his finger to his mouth to warn me to keep silence. I only noted the shake of the head. Sera-phina

had not come. The Havana people must have taken her. It was all over with me. The roaring noise made me think that I was on a beach by the sea, with the smugglers, perhaps, at night down in Kent. The silence that fell upon the court was like the silence of a grave. Then someone began to speak in measured, portentous Spanish, that seemed a memory of the past.

"I, the ambassador of his Catholic Majesty, being here upon my honour and on my oath, demand the re-surrender of this gentleman, whose courage equals his innocence. Documents which have just reached my hands establish clearly the mistake of which he is the victim. The functionary who is called Alcayde of the carcel at Havana confused the men. Nikola el Escoces escaped, having murdered the judge whose place it was to identify. I demand that the prisoner be set at liberty..."

A long time after a harsh voice said:

"Your Excellency, we retire, of course, from the prosecution."

A different one directed:

"Gentlemen of the jury, you will return a verdict of 'Not Guilty'..."

Down below they were cheering uproariously because my life was saved. But it was I that had to face my saved life. I sat there, my head bowed into my hands. The old judge was speaking to me in a tone of lofty compassion:

"You have suffered much, as it seems, but suffering is the lot of us men. Rejoice now that your character is cleared; that here in this public place you have received the verdict of your countrymen that restores you to the liberties of our country and the affection of your kindred. I rejoice with you who am a very old man, at the end of my life...."

It was rather tremendous, his deep voice, his weighted words. Suffering is the lot of us men!... The formidable legal array, the great powers of a nation, had stood up to teach me that, and they had taught me that--suffering is the lot of us men!

It takes long enough to realize that someone is dead at a distance. I had done that. But how long, how long it needs to know that the life of your heart has come back from the dead. For years afterwards I could not bear to have her out of my sight.

Of our first meeting in London all I remember is a speechlessness that was like the awed hesitation of our overtried souls before the greatness of a change from

the verge of despair to the opening of a supreme joy.

The whole world, the whole of life, with her return, had changed all around me; it enveloped me, it enfolded me so lightly as not to be felt, so suddenly as not to be believed in, so completely that that whole meeting was an embrace, so softly that at last it lapsed into a sense of rest that was like the fall of a beneficent and welcome death.

For suffering is the lot of man, but not inevitable failure or worthless despair which is without end--suffering, the mark of manhood, which bears within its pain a hope of felicity like a jewel set in iron....

Her first words were:

"You broke our compact. You went away from me whilst I was sleeping." Only the deepness of her reproach revealed the depth of her love, and the suffering she too had endured to reach a union that was to be without end--and to forgive.

And, looking back, we see Romance--that subtle thing that is mirage--that is life. It is the goodness of the years we have lived through, of the old time when we did this or that, when we dwelt here or there. Looking back, it seems a wonderful enough thing that I who am this, and she who is that, commencing so far away a life that, after such sufferings borne together and apart, ended so tranquilly there in a world so stable--that she and I should have passed through so much, good chance and evil chance, sad hours and joyful, all lived down and swept away into the little heap of dust that is life. That, too, is Romance!

THE END