

CHAPTER XII

THOMAS COMES TO SHORE

For an hour or more I stood thus craning my neck upwards to seek for the priest. At length when I was about to sink back into the hold, for I could stand no longer in that cramped posture, I saw a woman's dress pass by the hole in the deck, and knew it for one that was worn by a lady who had escaped with me in the boat.

'Senora,' I whispered, 'for the love of God listen to me. It is I, d'Aila, who am chained down here among the slaves.'

She started, then as the priest had done, she sat herself down upon the deck, and I told her of my dreadful plight, not knowing that she was acquainted with it, and of the horrors below.

'Alas! senor,' she answered, 'they can be little worse than those above. A dreadful sickness is raging among the crew, six are already dead and many more are raving in their last madness. I would that the sea had swallowed us with the rest, for we have been rescued from it only to fall into hell. Already my mother is dead and my little brother is dying.'

'Where is the priest?' I asked.

'He died this morning and has just been cast into the sea. Before he died he spoke of you, and prayed me to help you if I could. But his words were wild and I thought that he might be distraught. And indeed how can I help you?'

'Perhaps you can find me food and drink,' I answered 'and for our friend, God rest his soul. What of the Captain Sarceda? Is he also dead?'

'No, senor, he alone is recovering of all whom the scourge has smitten. And now I must go to my brother, but first I will seek food for you.'

She went and presently returned with meat and a flask of wine which she had hidden beneath her dress, and I ate and blessed her.

For two days she fed me thus, bringing me food at night. On the second night she told me that her brother was dead and of all the crew only fifteen men and one officer remained untouched by the sickness, and that she herself grew ill. Also she said that the water was almost finished, and there was little food left for the slaves. After this she came no more, and I suppose that she died also.

It was within twenty hours of her last visit that I left this accursed ship. For a day none had come to feed or tend the slaves, and indeed many needed no tending, for they were dead. Some still lived however,

though so far as I could see the most of them were smitten with the plague. I myself had escaped the sickness, perhaps because of the strength and natural healthiness of my body, which has always saved me from fevers and diseases, fortified as it was by the good food that I had obtained. But now I knew that I could not live long, indeed chained in this dreadful charnel-house I prayed for death to release me from the horrors of such existence. The day passed as before in sweltering heat, unbroken by any air or motion, and night came at last, made hideous by the barbarous ravings of the dying. But even there and then I slept and dreamed that I was walking with my love in the vale of Waveney.

Towards the morning I was awakened by a sound of clanking iron, and opening my eyes, I saw that men were at work, by the light of lanterns, knocking the fetters from the dead and the living together. As the fetters were loosed a rope was put round the body of the slave, and dead or quick, he was hauled through the hatchway. Presently a heavy splash in the water without told the rest of the tale. Now I understood that all the slaves were being thrown overboard because of the want of water, and in the hope that it might avail to save from the pestilence those of the Spaniards who still remained alive.

I watched them at their work for a while till there were but two slaves between me and the workers, of whom one was living and the other dead. Then I bethought me that this would be my fate also, to be cast quick into the sea, and took counsel with myself as to whether I should declare that I was whole from the plague and pray them to spare me, or

whether I should suffer myself to be drowned. The desire for life was strong, but perhaps it may serve to show how great were the torments from which I was suffering, and how broken was my spirit by misfortunes and the horrors around me, when I say that I determined to make no further effort to live, but rather to accept death as a merciful release. And, indeed, I knew that there was little likelihood of such attempts being of avail, for I saw that the Spanish sailors were mad with fear and had but one desire, to be rid of the slaves who consumed the water, and as they believed, had bred the pestilence. So I said such prayers as came into my head, and although with a great shivering of fear, for the poor flesh shrinks from its end and the unknown beyond it, however high may be the spirit, I prepared myself to die.

Now, having dragged away my neighbour in misery, the living savage, the men turned to me. They were naked to the middle, and worked furiously to be done with their hateful task, sweating with the heat, and keeping themselves from fainting by draughts of spirit.

'This one is alive also and does not seem so sick,' said a man as he struck the fetters from me.

'Alive or dead, away with the dog!' answered another hoarsely, and I saw that it was the same officer to whom I had been given as a slave. 'It is that Englishman, and he it is who brought us ill luck. Cast the Jonah overboard and let him try his evil eye upon the sharks.'

'So be it,' answered the other man, and finished striking off my fetters. 'Those who have come to a cup of water each a day, do not press their guests to share it. They show them the door. Say your prayers, Englishman, and may they do you more good than they have done for most on this accursed ship. Here, this is the stuff to make drowning easy, and there is more of it on board than of water,' and he handed me the flask of spirit. I took it and drank deep, and it comforted me a little. Then they put the rope round me and at a signal those on the deck above began to haul till I swung loose beneath the hatchway. As I passed that Spaniard to whom I had been given in slavery, and who but now had counselled my casting away, I saw his face well in the light of the lantern, and there were signs on it that a physician could read clearly.

'Farewell,' I said to him, 'we may soon meet again. Fool, why do you labour? Take your rest, for the plague is on you. In six hours you will be dead!'

His jaw dropped with terror at my words, and for a moment he stood speechless. Then he uttered a fearful oath and aimed a blow at me with the hammer he held, which would swiftly have put an end to my sufferings had I not at that moment been lifted from his reach by those who pulled above.

In another second I had fallen on the deck as they slacked the rope. Near me stood two black men whose office it was to cast us poor wretches into the sea, and behind them, seated in a chair, his face haggard from

recent illness, sat de Garcia fanning himself with his sombrero, for the night was very hot.

He recognised me at once in the moonlight, which was brilliant, and said, 'What! are you here and still alive, Cousin? You are tough indeed; I thought that you must be dead or dying. Indeed had it not been for this accursed plague, I would have seen to it myself. Well, it has come right at last, and here is the only lucky thing in all this voyage, that I shall have the pleasure of sending you to the sharks. It consoles me for much, friend Wingfield. So you came across the seas to seek vengeance on me? Well, I hope that your stay has been pleasant. The accommodation was a little poor, but at least the welcome was hearty. And now it is time to speed the parting guest. Good night, Thomas Wingfield; if you should chance to meet your mother presently, tell her from me that I was grieved to have to kill her, for she is the one being whom I have loved. I did not come to murder her as you may have thought, but she forced me to it to save myself, since had I not done so, I should never have lived to return to Spain. She had too much of my own blood to suffer me to escape, and it seems that it runs strong in your veins also, else you would scarcely hold so fast by vengeance. Well, it has not prospered you!' And he dropped back into the chair and fell to fanning himself again with the broad hat.

Even then, as I stood upon the eve of death, I felt my blood run hot within me at the sting of his coarse taunts. Truly de Garcia's triumph was complete. I had come to hunt him down, and what was the end of it?

He was about to hurl me to the sharks. Still I answered him with such dignity as I could command.

'You have me at some disadvantage,' I said. 'Now if there is any manhood left in you, give me a sword and let us settle our quarrel once and for all. You are weak from sickness I know, but what am I who have spent certain days and nights in this hell of yours. We should be well matched, de Garcia.'

'Perhaps so, Cousin, but where is the need? To be frank, things have not gone over well with me when we stood face to face before, and it is odd, but do you know, I have been troubled with a foreboding that you would be the end of me. That is one of the reasons why I sought a change of air to these warmer regions. But see the folly of forebodings, my friend. I am still alive, though I have been ill, and I mean to go on living, but you are--forgive me for mentioning it--you are already dead. Indeed those gentlemen,' and he pointed to the two black men who were taking advantage of our talk to throw into the sea the slave who followed me up the hatchway, 'are waiting to put a stop to our conversation. Have you any message that I can deliver for you? If so, out with it, for time is short and that hold must be cleared by daybreak.'

'I have no message to give you from myself, though I have a message for you, de Garcia,' I answered. 'But before I tell it, let me say a word.

You seem to have won, wicked murderer as you are, but perhaps the game

is not yet played. Your fears may still come true. I am dead, but my vengeance may yet live on, for I leave it to the Hand in which I should have left it at first. You may live some years longer, but do you think that you shall escape? One day you will die as surely as I must die to-night, and what then, de Garcia?'

'A truce, I pray you,' he said with a sneer. 'Surely you have not been consecrated priest. You had a message, you said. Pray deliver it quickly. Time presses, Cousin Wingfield. Who sends messages to an exile like myself?'

'Isabella de Siguenza, whom you cheated with a false marriage and abandoned,' I said.

He started from his chair and stood over me.

'What of her?' he whispered fiercely.

'Only this, the monks walled her up alive with her babe.'

'Walled her up alive! Mother of God! how do you know that?'

'I chanced to see it done, that is all. She prayed me to tell you of her end and the child's, and that she died hiding your name, loving and forgiving. This was all her message, but I will add to it. May she haunt you for ever, she and my mother; may they haunt you through life and

death, through earth and hell.'

He covered his face with his hands for a moment, then dropping them sank back into the chair and called to the black sailors.

'Away with this slave. Why are you so slow?'

The men advanced upon me, but I was not minded to be handled by them if I could help it, and I was minded to cause de Garcia to share my fate.

Suddenly I bounded at him, and gripping him round the middle, I dragged him from his chair. Such was the strength that rage and despair gave to me that I succeeded in swinging him up to the level of the bulwarks. But there the matter ended, for at that moment the two black sailors sprang upon us both, and tore him from my grip. Then seeing that all was lost, for they were about to cut me down with their swords, I placed my hand upon the bulwark and leaped into the sea.

My reason told me that I should do well to drown as quickly as possible, and I thought to myself that I would not try to swim, but would sink at once. Yet love of life was too strong for me, and so soon as I touched the water, I struck out and began to swim along the side of the ship, keeping myself in her shadow, for I feared lest de Garcia should cause me to be shot at with arrows and musket balls. Presently as I went I heard him say with an oath:

'He has gone, and for good this time, but my foreboding went near to

coming true after all. Bah! how the sight of that man frightens me.'

Now I knew in my heart that I was doing a mad thing, for though if no shark took me, I might float for six or eight hours in this warm water yet I must sink at last, and what would my struggle have profited me? Still I swam on slowly, and after the filth and stench of the slave hold, the touch of the clean water and the breath of the pure air were like food and wine to me, and I felt strength enter into me as I went. By this time I was a hundred yards or more from the ship, and though those on board could scarcely have seen me, I could still hear the splash of the bodies, as the slaves were flung from her, and the drowning cries of such among them as still lived.

I lifted my head and looked round the waste of water, and seeing something floating on it at a distance, I swam towards it, expecting that every moment would be my last, because of the sharks which abound in these seas. Soon I was near it, and to my joy I perceived that it was a large barrel, which had been thrown from the ship, and was floating upright in the water. I reached it, and pushing at it from below, contrived to tilt it so that I caught its upper edge with my hand. Then I saw that it was half full of meal cakes, and that it had been cast away because the meal was stinking. It was the weight of these rotten cakes acting as ballast, that caused the tub to float upright in the water. Now I bethought me, that if I could get into this barrel I should be safe from the sharks for a while, but how to do it I did not know.

While I wondered, chancing to glance behind me, I saw the fin of a shark standing above the water not twenty paces away, and advancing rapidly towards me. Then terror seized me and gave me strength and the wit of despair. Pulling down the edge of the barrel till the water began to pour into it, I seized it on either side with my hands, and lifting my weight upon them, I doubled my knees. To this hour I cannot tell how I accomplished it, but the next second I was in the cask, with no other hurt than a scraped shin. But though I had found a boat, the boat itself was like to sink, for what with my weight and that of the rotten meal, and of the water which had poured over the rim, the edge of the barrel was not now an inch above the level of the sea, and I knew that did another bucketful come aboard, it would no longer bear me. At that moment also I saw the fin of the shark within four yards, and then felt the barrel shake as the fish struck it with his nose.

Now I began to bail furiously with my hands, and as I bailed, the edge of the cask lifted itself above the water. When it had risen some two inches, the shark, enraged at my escape, came to the surface, and turning on its side, bit at the tub so that I heard its teeth grate on the wood and iron bands, causing it to heel over and to spin round, shipping more water as it heeled. Now I must bail afresh, and had the fish renewed its onset, I should have been lost. But not finding wood and iron to its taste, it went away for a while, although I saw its fin from time to time for the space of some hours. I bailed with my hands till I could lift the water no longer, then making shift to take off my boot, I bailed with that. Soon the edge of the cask stood twelve inches

above the water, and I did not lighten it further, fearing lest it should overturn. Now I had time to rest and to remember that all this was of no avail, since I must die at last either by the sea or because of thirst, and I lamented that my cowardice had only sufficed to prolong my sufferings.

Then I prayed to God to succour me, and never did I pray more heartily than in that hour, and when I had finished praying some sort of peace and hope fell upon me. I thought it marvellous that I should thus have escaped thrice from great perils within the space of a few days, first from the sinking carak, then from pestilence and starvation in the hold of the slave-ship, and now, if only for a while, from the cruel jaws of the sharks. It seemed to me that I had not been preserved from dangers which proved fatal to so many, only that I might perish miserably at last, and even in my despair I began to hope when hope was folly; though whether this relief was sent to me from above, or whether it was simply that being so much alive at the moment I could not believe that I should soon be dead, is not for me to say.

At the least my courage rose again, and I could even find heart to note the beauty of the night. The sea was smooth as a pond, there was no breath of wind, and now that the moon began to sink, thousands of stars of a marvellous brightness, such as we do not see in England, gemmed the heavens everywhere. At last these grew pale, and dawn began to flush the east, and after it came the first rays of sunlight. But now I could not see fifty yards around me, because of a dense mist that gathered on the

face of the quiet water, and hung there for an hour or more. When the sun was well up and at length the mist cleared away, I perceived that I had drifted far from the ship, of which I could only see the masts that grew ever fainter till they vanished. Now the surface of the sea was clear of fog except in one direction, where it hung in a thick bank of vapour, though why it should rest there and nowhere else, I could not understand.

Then the sun grew hot, and my sufferings commenced, for except the draught of spirits that had been given me in the hold of the slave-ship, I had touched no drink for a day and a night. I will not tell them all in particular detail, it is enough to say that those can scarcely imagine them who have never stood for hour after hour in a barrel, bare-headed and parched with thirst, while the fierce heat of a tropical sun beat down on them from above, and was reflected upward from the glassy surface of the water. In time, indeed, I grew faint and dizzy, and could hardly save myself from falling into the sea, and at last I sank into a sort of sleep or insensibility, from which I was awakened by a sound of screaming birds and of falling water. I looked and saw to my wonder and delight, that what I had taken to be a bank of mist was really low-lying land, and that I was drifting rapidly with the tide towards the bar of a large river. The sound of birds came from great flocks of sea-gulls that were preying on the shoals of fish, which fed at the meeting of the fresh and salt water. Presently, as I watched, a gull seized a fish that could not have weighed less than three pounds, and strove to lift it from the sea. Failing in this, it beat the fish on

the head with its beak till it died, and had begun to devour it, when I drifted down upon the spot and made haste to seize the fish. In another moment, dreadful as it may seem, I was devouring the food raw, and never have I eaten with better appetite, or found more refreshment in a meal.

When I had swallowed all that I was able, without drinking water, I put the rest of the fish into the pocket of my coat, and turned my thoughts to the breakers on the bar. Soon it was evident to me that I could not pass them standing in my barrel, so I hastened to upset myself into the water and to climb astride of it. Presently we were in the surf, and I had much ado to cling on, but the tide bore me forward bravely, and in half an hour more the breakers were past, and I was in the mouth of the great river. Now fortune favoured me still further, for I found a piece of wood floating on the stream which served me for a paddle, and by its help I was enabled to steer my craft towards the shore, that as I went I perceived to be clothed with thick reeds, in which tall and lovely trees grew in groups, bearing clusters of large nuts in their crowns. Hither to this shore I came without further accident, having spent some ten hours in my tub, though it was but a chance that I did so, because of the horrible reptiles called crocodiles, or, by some, alligators, with which this river swarmed. But of them I knew nothing as yet.

I reached land but just in time, for before I was ashore the tide turned, and tide and current began to carry me out to sea again, whence assuredly I had never come back. Indeed, for the last ten minutes, it took all the strength that I had to force the barrel along towards the

bank. At length, however, I perceived that it floated in not more than four feet of water, and sliding from it, I waded to the bank and cast myself at length there to rest and thank God who thus far had preserved me miraculously. But my thirst, which now returned upon me more fiercely than ever, would not suffer me to lie thus for long, so I staggered to my feet and walked along the bank of the river till I came to a pool of rain water, which on the tasting, proved to be sweet and good. Then I drank, weeping for joy at the taste of the water, drank till I could drink no more, and let those who have stood in such a plight remember what water was to them, for no words of mine can tell it. After I had drunk and washed the brine from my face and body, I drew out the remainder of my fish and ate it thankfully, and thus refreshed, cast myself down to sleep in the shade of a bush bearing white flowers, for I was utterly outworn.

When I opened my eyes again it was night, and doubtless I should have slept on through many hours more had it not been for a dreadful itch and pain that took me in every part, till at length I sprang up and cursed in my agony. At first I was at a loss to know what occasioned this torment, till I perceived that the air was alive with gnat-like insects which made a singing noise, and then settling on my flesh, sucked blood and spat poison into the wound at one and the same time. These dreadful insects the Spaniards name mosquitoes. Nor were they the only flies, for hundreds of other creatures, no bigger than a pin's head, had fastened on to me like bulldogs to a baited bear, boring their heads into the flesh, where in the end they cause festers. They are named garrapatas

by the Spanish, and I take them to be the young of the tic. Others there were, also, too numerous to mention, and of every shape and size, though they had this in common, all bit and all were venomous. Before the morning these plagues had driven me almost to madness, for in no way could I obtain relief from them. Towards dawn I went and lay in the water, thinking to lessen my sufferings, but before I had been there ten minutes I saw a huge crocodile rise up from the mud beside me. I sprang away to the bank horribly afraid, for never before had I beheld so monstrous and evil-looking a brute, to fall again into the clutches of the creatures, winged and crawling, that were waiting for me there by myriads.

But enough of these damnable insects!