

Romance: A Chronicle of the Adventures of John



Kemp in England and Jamaica-----By Joseph Conrad

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CHAPTER IV.

IT WAS, I suppose, what I demanded of Fate—to be gently wafted into the position of a hero of romance, without rough hands at my throat. It is what we all ask, I suppose; and we get it sometimes in ten-minute snatches. I didn't know where I was going. It was enough for me to sail in and out of the patches of shadows that fell from the moonlight above our heads.

We embarked, and, as we drew further out, the land turned to a shadow, spotted here and there with little lights. Behind us a cock crowed. The shingle crashed at intervals beneath the feet of a large body of men. I remembered the smugglers; but it was as if I had remembered them only to forget them forever. Old Rangley, who steered with the sheet in his hand, kept up an unintelligible babble. Carlos and Castro talked under their breaths.

And then old Rangley hove to, to wait for the ship, and sat half asleep, lurching over the tiller. He was a very unreliable scoundrel. The boat leaked like a sieve. The wind freshened, and we three began to ask ourselves how it was going to end. There were no lights upon the sea.

At last, well out, a blue gleam caught our eyes; but by this time old Rangley was helpless, and it fell to me to manage the boat. Carlos was of no use—he knew it, and, without saying a word, busied himself in bailing the water out. But Castro, I was surprised to notice, knew more than I did about a boat, and, maimed as he was, made himself useful.

"To me it looks as if we should drown," Carlos said at one point, very quietly. "I am sorry for you, Juan."

Castro had hauled the helpless form of old Rangley forward. I caught him muttering savagely:

"I could kill that old man!"

Further out in the bay we were caught in a heavy squall. Sitting by the tiller I got as much out of it as I knew how. We would go as far as we could before the run was over. Carlos bailed unceasingly, and without a word of complaint.

Castro, standing up unsteadily, growled, "We may do it yet! See, señor!"

The blue gleam was much larger—it flared smokily right up toward the sky. I made out ghostly parallelograms of a ship's sails high above us, and at last many faces peering unceasingly over the rail in our direction. We all shouted together.

I may say that it was thanks to me that we reached the ship. Our boat went down under us whilst I was tying a rope under Carlo's arms. He was standing up with the tiller still in his hand. On board the women passengers were screaming, and as I clung desperately to the rope that was thrown me, it struck me oddly that I had never before heard so many women's voices at the same time. Afterward, when I stood on the deck, they began laughing at old Rangley, who held forth in a thunderous voice, punctuated by hiccoughs:

"They carried I aboard—a cop—their lugger and sinks I in the cold, co-old sea."

After I had made it clear that I wanted to go with Carlos, and could pay for my passage, I was handed down into the steerage, where a tallow candle burned in a thick, blue atmosphere. I was stripped and filled with some fiery liquid, and fell asleep. Old Rangley was sent ashore with the pilot.

It was a new and strange life to me, opening there suddenly enough.

Looking at my companions at times, I had vague misgivings. It was as if these two had fascinated me to the verge of some danger. Sometimes Castro, looking up, uttered vague ejaculations. Carlos pushed his hat back and sighed. They had preoccupations, cares, interests in which they let me have no part.

Castro struck me as absolutely ruffianly. His head was knotted in a red, white-spotted handkerchief; his grizzled beard was tangled; he wore a black and rusty cloak, ragged at the edges, and his feet were often bare; at his side would lie his wooden right hand. As a rule, the place of his forearm was taken by a long, thin, steel blade, that he was forever sharpening.

Carlos had made Spain too hot to hold him in those tortuous intrigues of the Army of the Faith and Bourbon troops and Italian legions. From what I could understand he must have played fast and loose in an insolent manner. And there was some woman offended. There was a gay-

ness and gallantry in that part of it. He had known the very spirit of romance, and now he was sailing gallantly out to take up his inheritance from an uncle who was a great noble owning the greater part of one of the intendencias of Cuba.

"He's a very old man, I hear," Carlos said—"a little dotting, and having need of me."

It had come as a Godsend to him when his uncle had sent Tomas Castro to bring him to Cuba, to the town of Rio Medio.

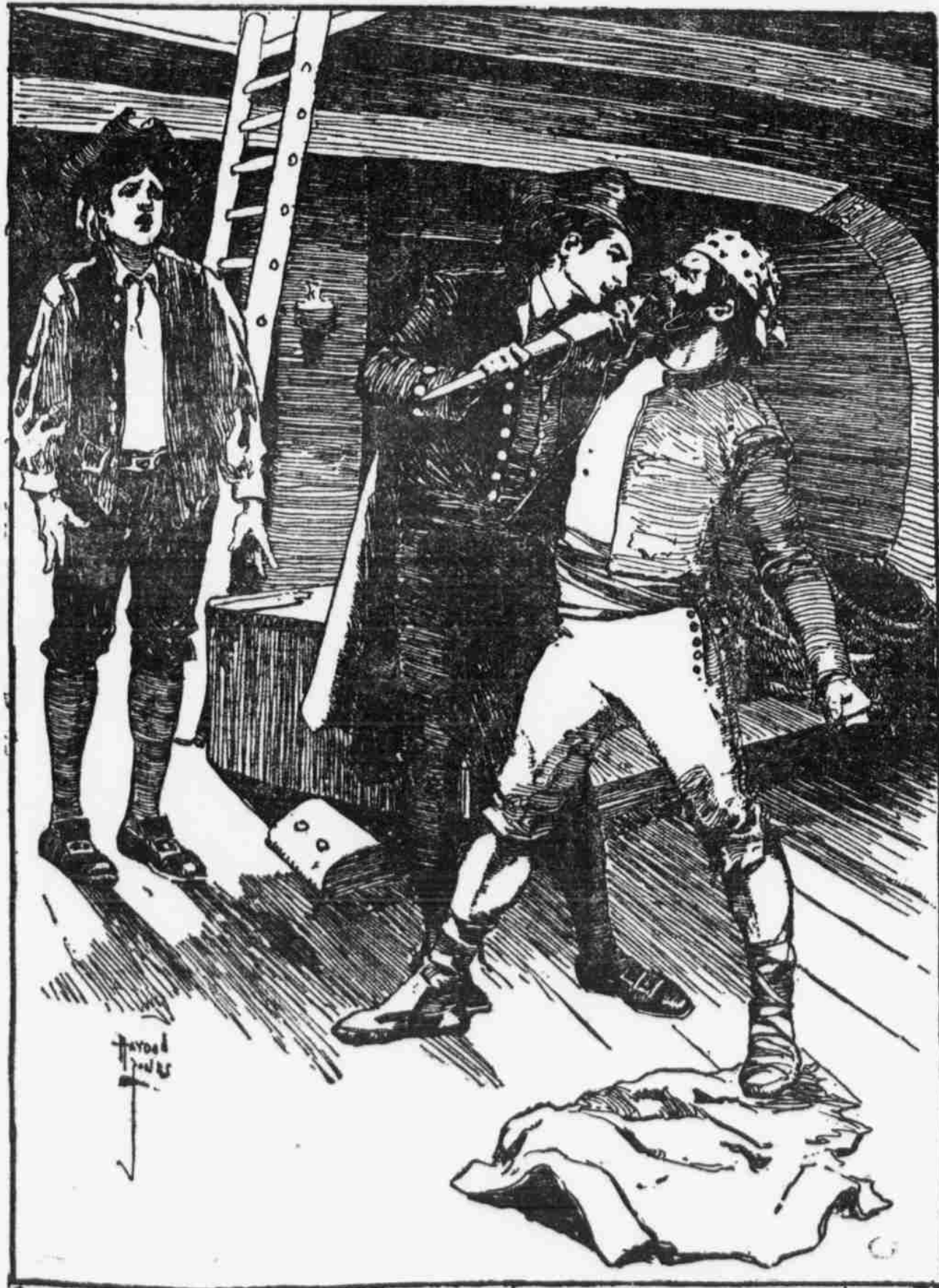
"The town belongs to my uncle. He is very rich; a grand d'espagne—everything;

He laughed a little proudly.

In a scrape?" He said. "I—I am in none. It is Tomas Castro there." He laughed affectionately. "He is as faithful as he is ugly," he said; "but I fear he has been a villain, too—What do I know? Over there in my uncle's town, there are some villains—you know what I mean, one must not speak too loudly on this ship. There is a man called O'Brien who mismanages my uncle's affairs. What do I know? The good Tomas has been in some villainy that is no affair of mine. He is a good friend and faithful dependent of my family's. He certainly had that man's

I imagined him an aristocratic scapegrace, a corsair—it was the Byronic period then—sailing out to marry a sort of shimmering princess with hair like Veronica's, bright golden. Carlos, however, knew nothing about his cousin; he cared little more, as far as I could tell. "What can she be to me since I have seen your * * * ?" he said once, and then stopped, looking at me with a certain tender irony. He insisted, though, that his aged uncle was in need of him.

There was certainly some mystery about that town of his uncle's. One night I overheard him say to Castro:



"YOU ARE A FOOL. HE WILL NOT MAKE US TO BE MOLESTED. HE IS MY KINSMAN."

but he is now very old, and has left Havana to die in his palace in his own town. He has an only daughter, a Dona Seraphina, and I suppose if I find favor in his eyes I shall marry her and inherit my uncle's great riches; I am the only one that is left of the family to inherit." He waved his hand and smiled a little. "Yaya; a little of that great wealth would be welcome. If I had had a few pence more there would have been none of this worry, and I should not have been on this dirty ship in these rags." He looked down good humoredly at his clothes.

"But," I said, "how do you come to be in a scrape at all?"

watch—the man we met by evil chance at Liverpool, a man who came from Jamaica. He had bought it—of a bad man, perhaps. I do not ask. It was Castro your police wished to take. But I, ben Dieu, do you think I would take watches?"

I certainly did not think he had taken a watch; but I did not relinquish the idea that he, in a glamorous, romantic way, had been a pirate. Rooksby had certainly hinted as much in his irritation.

He lost none of his romantic charm in my eyes. The fact that he was sailing in uncomfortable circumstances detracted little; nor did his clothes, which, at the worst, were better than any I had ever had. And he wore them with an air and a grace.

"Tell me, Oh, my Tomas, would it be safe to take this caballero, my cousin, to Rio Medio?"

Castro paused, and then murmured gruffly:

"Señor, unless that Irishman is consulted beforehand, or the English lord would undertake to join with the pirates, it is very assuredly not safe."

Carlos made a little exclamation of mild astonishment.

"Pero? Is it so bad as that in my uncle's own town?"

Tomas muttered something that I did not catch, and then:

"If the English caballero committed indis-