The Spanish Cave

The Terror of Villadonga

by Geoffrey Household, 1900-1988

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To my Father

Chapter 1

"WHAT'S holding it?" exclaimed Pablo Candelas, hauling on the anchor rope. "A thousand demons! What's holding it?"

The little fifteen-foot boat rocked as he tugged. His brown, hairy arms hauled until the gunwale was nearly level with the water; but the anchor would not come up. Pablo hoisted the mainsail and, letting out the slack of the rope, tacked back and forth over the anchor, hoping to loosen its grip on the bottom. Each time the cable tautened without giving an inch, and the boat came up into the wind with sail fluttering.

"Keep her so, Ricardito," said Pablo, giving up the tiller to his companion.

He balanced himself on the locker in the bows, and filling his bare, bronzed chest with a mighty breath plunged down into the green water.

Ricardito, otherwise Mr. Richard Garland, and usually known to his friends and elders as plain Dick, kept the boat into the wind. Hand on the tiller, he waited for Pablo to reappear. Dick was twelve. His seamanship was newly acquired, and he was always thrilled when the fisherman showed confidence in it. Pablo, after taking him up and down the coast in all kinds of weather, had seen that the wiry little foreigner could be trusted to do what he was told, and thereafter had treated him just as if he were one of the boys of his own village, who learned to sail a boat almost as soon as they could walk.

Dick's parents had died two years before the story begins. Then he had left his London home and sailed off on a freighter down Channel and across the long swells of the Bay of Biscay to Spain. He had chosen to live with his elder brother, Hal Garland, who was a railway surveyor in Asturias on the north coast of the Peninsula. At Villadonga, the little village which was his brother's headquarters,

he had picked up Spanish very quickly. As soon as he could speak it he was no longer lonely. The Spaniards, who are the most hospitable of people, did their best to make the boy feel at home. The men liked his courage, his frank, grey eyes, and big, humorous mouth. The women teased him because his short, tow-coloured hair was always standing on end, and behind his back said that he was "very distinguished." All the villagers respected him; some even addressed him as Don Ricardo. They considered that he must have miraculous intelligence to speak two languages, for none of them spoke more than one.

Dick felt the boat shiver as Pablo, deep down under the keel, wrestled with the anchor. A few seconds later, the fisherman bobbed up alongside, his hair plastered over his eyes, his long black moustache dripping water, and looking for all the world like a big, bristly, good-tempered seal.

"Give me the knife, Ricardito," he said.

Dick picked up the keen knife which they used for cleaning fish, and handed it to him. Pablo stuck it in the wide, red sash at his waist.

"Are you going to cut the rope?" asked Dick.

"No," answered the fisherman. "The anchor's caught in a little thing—quite a little thing—and I want to cut the seaweed which is holding that little thing to the bottom."

"What is it?" Dick asked.

"You'll see," said Pablo. "As the song says, the waters of the sea are vast, and no one knows what's at the bottom."

Pablo went down again, and after a short stay below clambered into the boat and began to haul up the anchor.

"Keep her steady, Ricardito!" he ordered. "We'll stay right over this spot a while."

The anchor came aboard. One of the flukes was jammed in a round, white object. Pablo gently worked it free, and handed the white thing to Dick without a word. It was a human skull. Only in pictures of the pirate flag had Dick seen one before. He held it on his knees and looked at it without fear, though his heart was beating fast with excitement.

"Can I keep it?" he asked.

The fisherman shook his head.

"It belongs to him who is down below," he said.

"Do you know who he was?" enquired Dick.

"Might be one of many," answered the fisherman grimly. "Give it him back, Ricardito, and let me take the tiller."

Dick dropped the skull overboard. The north wind heeled the boat over, and they scudded merrily along the coast towards Villadonga. Dick noticed that they had been anchored some two hundred yards off the Cave of the Angels, a natural grotto in the cliffs, and asked Pablo if many boats had been lost thereabouts; but the fisherman would not give a definite answer to any of his questions. "Maybe yes" and "maybe no" were all he would say. After a while Dick gave up trying to get information, and fell silent. He watched with a new interest the coast along which they sped. He had always been attracted by the mystery of that beautiful shore, but now it fascinated him. Perhaps it could answer the questions that Pablo would not.

Facing the sea was a line of low, irregular cliffs, furrowed with many ledges and crannies by which, as Dick well knew, one could climb down to the water's edge without difficulty. Standing on top of the cliffs, you seemed to be on a sea-wall, for the ground sloped gently down on the landward side, so that by going a few hundred yards away from the sea you descended almost to sea level. Here and there the wall was broken by narrow clefts up which the swell of the Atlantic boomed and thundered. Wherever it had forced a way through the cliffs, the water spread out peacefully, forming tiny coves floored with silver sand, where the bathing was perfect. Dick knew one such cove where the sea entered through a natural archway. There were many caves in the face of the cliffs, and there must have been many more hidden under the sea, for right inland were ponds of salt water fed by underground channels. The level of these ponds rose and fell with the tides, and their water bubbled and spouted mysteriously in time of storm.

Pablo rounded a low, flat-topped island of rock, called the Cayo de la Ofrenda—Offering Key—and sailed the boat into the sandy, sunlit estuary that lay hidden behind it. Half a mile up the little river Dick saw the trees and red roofs and white walls of Villadonga, standing among green fields where fat red cows pastured all the year round. He loved that first glimpse of Villadonga. In the soft, golden light of the September evening it looked more peaceful than ever—a home made to welcome adventurers. Pablo moored the boat to an iron ring hanging from the quay, and Dick jumped ashore. He said good-bye to the fisherman in a hurry, for he was eager to tell Hal about the skull. Taking with him a basket of the rock bass they had caught, he ran up the village street towards their house.

Dick burst into the living-room, but found that Hal had not yet come home. So he took the rock bass to Paca, their fat cook, and told her what else they had fished up from the sea.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Paca, looking round the kitchen as if she expected something to jump out at her. "A skull, did you say?"

"Yes, a real skull," answered Dick.

"Where were you when you found it?"

"Off the Cave of the Angels."

"The Cave of the Angels!" repeated Paca, making the sign of the cross. "And what was Pablo thinking about to take you to the Cave of the Angels?"

"We were fishing," said Dick, "and that's the best place for rock bass. What's the matter with it? I've often climbed down to the cave. There's nothing in it but an old saint, anyway."

"Now don't let me hear you talk like that, young man!" snapped Paca. "Get out of my kitchen at once!"

"Oh boil yourself!" grumbled Dick in English—an expression which was quite lost on Paca; but he got out.

There *was* nothing but an old saint in the Cave of the Angels; a rough statue of St. Andrew, one of the patron saints of fishermen and not a person of whom anyone ought to speak disrespectfully. All the same, Paca herself, when the kettle boiled over or the fish burned, had been heard to speak disrespectfully of any and every saint. Dick thought she had been unfair to him. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Paca had wanted to get rid of him. Perhaps, like Pablo, she didn't want to answer questions.

“Now I wonder just what is the matter with the Cave of the Angels,” said Dick to himself.

He retired to his hammock in the garden, slung between an apple tree and an orange tree, and fell to wondering whether, when the oranges ripened—for he was tired of apples—he would be able to pick them without getting out of the hammock.

In an hour’s time Hal came striding up from the village. He was twelve years older than Dick; a powerfully built young man, who loved making things with his own hands.

Dick scrambled out of the hammock.

“Hi, old man! Where have you been?”

“Hello, kid!” Hal answered.

“Why didn’t you come back before? I’ve got something to tell you. Do you know what happened to-day?”

“More or less,” said his elder brother, grinning.

“Oh lord, Hal!” exclaimed Dick in a disappointed voice. “You know everything!”

“Well, let’s hear your end of the story,” said Hal.

So Dick told him all about their fishing expedition, and what they had found.

“How did you know, Hal?” he ended.

“I heard a lot of gossip while I was coming up the street. They were all chattering about *Deeckie* and Ricardito and Don Ricardo. So I turned into the inn to get the news.”

“What did Pablo say?” asked Dick eagerly.

“Mighty little,” Hal answered. “Nobody said very much. Dick, they give me the impression that they just don’t want to talk about it to outsiders.”

“That’s what I think,” said Dick. “Hal, can they have…?”

He paused, for on second thoughts he knew that none of his beloved friends down in the village would cover up a crime. He could imagine Pablo using the long knife in his sash, but he couldn’t imagine him lying about it afterwards.

Hal smiled, knowing what Dick had been about to say.

“No, there’s not been a murder. You hit on the remains of some poor fellow dead long since in following the sea. There’s nothing strange about that. It happens often enough in every fishing village. But what is strange, Dick, is that they’re sort of frightened. I believe that finding the skull off the Cave of the Angels has reminded them of something.”

“Then why don’t they say what it is?” asked Dick.

“I don’t know,” Hal replied. “They are funny people. Maybe it has reminded them of some superstition that they are all ashamed of believing.”

The blue smoke drifting up from the chimney, and carrying an odour of fragrant wood and delicate frying, reminded them that they were late for supper. Their house suggested generous feeding for man and beast. It was an old farmhouse with thick walls of grey stone, a roof of heavy red tiles, and an archway in the middle holding two long, clumsy country carts. On the left of the archway was the vast, stone-floored kitchen, and on the right the living-room. Over all was a second storey, surrounded by a worm-eaten wooden balcony. The house had nothing modern in it but the electric light. That Hal had provided by damming the

mountain stream which ran through the garden, and making it drive a home-made waterwheel harnessed to a dynamo.

Indignant because they had not come on time, Paca served them supper with a stern face. When Paca was stern Dick always wanted to laugh. She seemed to swell visibly. She set her lips in a hard, straight line, and her heavy, black eyebrows fairly bristled. To Hal she was very polite, saying "yes, Don Enrico," and "no, Don Enrico," instead of answering him back as if she were a sporting maiden aunt of his—the attitude she took when she was in a good temper. Every time Dick sniggered, she looked at him out of the corners of her eyes with an air of rebuke as if he had laughed in church.

"Er—how beautifully you fry fish, Paca," said Hal, trying to make peace in the family.

"They would be better if the señores came on time," retorted Paca, "instead of chit-chattering in the garden."

"Paca," said Hal, "anything that is prepared by your unrivalled hands"—he blew them a kiss in his best Castilian manner—"is good whether we are late or not."

"Eh, man!" exclaimed Paca.

She became fat and jolly again all of a sudden, winked at Dick as much as to say that she didn't believe a word of it, and bustled out to the kitchen to return with a vast earthenware bowl of wild strawberries which she herself had picked for them on the hills.

Whether the cause was too many strawberries or a presentiment of the ordeals to come, Dick had nightmares all night and was glad that Hal's room was next to his own, and the door wide open between them. But he did not admit that, even to himself.

Dick spent his mornings with the village priest, Father Juan, learning Latin and Greek. He loved to learn anything new, and so the grown-ups around him—since people are always ready to explain whatever interests them most— taught him all they could. Pablo taught him fishing, and how to sail a boat. Hal taught him how and where to camp in the wild mountains. The wine-merchant showed him how to make barrels—a very difficult art. And Doña Mariquita, who was the widow of a Spanish grandee and had a daughter of Dick's own age, taught him to play the guitar.

Father Juan was tall and thin and very courteous. He had a high forehead and a wide, gentle mouth. A little wart grew on his cheek, and two long white hairs sprouted from it. Dick always wondered why Father Juan did not cut them; but as a matter of fact the priest had seen them in the mirror for so many years that he had got used to them and altogether forgotten they were there. He treated all people as if they were his equals. He would talk to Dick about his troubles in the parish and to Pablo about mediæval manuscripts. They loved him because he did it so naturally; it never occurred to him that they did not know as much as he. Yet Father Juan was not a bore, for he talked in such a clear and simple way that his listeners could always grasp the subject and be interested by it too.

That morning in the priest's library they did, as usual, an hour's Latin and an hour's Greek. Then arrived the period to which Dick always looked forward; a break of quarter of an hour while Father Juan discoursed on whatever happened to be in his mind—politics or fishing or the latest news from far-off America or the

history of Asturias. Dick used to lead him on, for as often as not Father Juan would seem to forget all about the third hour of lessons which was still to come.

"Well, my son," he would say after the hour had passed in talk, "we've decided whether we think that King Pelayo really drove the Moors out of Asturias or not. That is time well spent."

And Dick, learning all the while, would feel that he really had decided something.

When the break came that morning, Father Juan said with a smile:

"I suppose you're bursting to hear all about the Cave of the Angels, Ricardito."

"You do know all about it, don't you, padre?" asked Dick eagerly.

"Not much more than you do, really," answered the priest. "From time immemorial there has been a belief along the coast that the Cave of the Angels is in some way dangerous. I expect that one of the early Christian missionaries in Asturias gave it its name to try and make the people less afraid of it."

"But why should they think it dangerous?" asked Dick.

"No reason at all that I know of. I don't think a man or a boat has ever been lost there. But often nets and anchors have brought up bones and pieces of iron and old weapons. It wouldn't surprise me if there were an undersea current setting into the cliff which sweeps up all the loose matter on the rock bottom. Do you think that's possible, Dick? You know the coast pretty well."

"It might be," answered Dick, flattered at the natural way in which Father Juan asked his opinion, "but there's no surface current, and a ledge runs out under water from the cliff, so that the sea is only about twenty feet deep at low tide."

"It's more than that right below the cave," said Father Juan.

"What!" exclaimed Dick. "Have you sounded it?"

"I tried to. But in one place I couldn't find bottom at fifty fathoms."

"I don't believe even Pablo knows that," Dick said admiringly. "What were you doing there, padre?"

"As the humble priest of this parish," replied Father Juan simply, "it's my duty to find out all I can about it."

There and then Dick firmly made up his mind to investigate the Cave of the Angels and its surroundings for himself. But he wanted to know more of what he might meet there.

"Father Juan, you don't think there's anything in what the village believes? You don't think the cave is spooky, do you?"

Father Juan looked him full in the face with gentle, steady eyes.

"I know it is not," he answered with absolute certainty. "You shouldn't believe the old wives' tales, Ricardito. There is nothing in all creation that a boy with a brave heart and a clear conscience need fear."

"Well, I don't," replied Dick. "I just wanted to hear you say so, though."

And for the rest of the hour Father Juan told him all the horrible folk-tales of Asturias, and then explained every one of them away.

"Hm," said Father Juan, looking at his watch. "Now that we've decided there are no such things as ghosts, I suppose we'd better have some lunch."

In the afternoon Dick went to call on Doña Mariquita. She was not in, but her daughter was. Twelve-year-old Maria de los Dolores Pelayo y Carvacal de Torrelavega, Condesa de Ribadasella, direct descendant of the very King Pelayo,

who had won back Asturias for the Christians, was churning butter in the dairy. To her friends she was known as plain Lola Pelayo. The villagers called her *la condesita*—the little countess. Father Juan occasionally addressed her by one or all of her titles. She was a slip of a long-legged girl, as delicate as a flower on a long, wavy stalk. She had a pale ivory skin, masses of straight black hair, and dark blue eyes. She was loveliest when she was very thoughtful or very angry. At other times she looked the mischievous little imp that she was. Although she was a countess, she and her mother had hardly any money; but they lived well, for they owned three cows, some chickens, a garden full of fruit and a house that five hundred years earlier had belonged to the captain of the Count of Ribadasella's guard.

"Hello, Lola!" said Dick.

"Hola, Ricardito! What's new?"

"Haven't you heard? Pablo and I found a skull below the Cave of the Angels…"

"Ricardito!" Lola cut him short with a little imperious wave of her hand. "Don't tell me about that! I don't want to hear!"

"What's there to be afraid of in an old skull?" said Dick in his most superior manner. "Why, it had barnacles on it!"

"You beastly little heathen!" Lola cried.

"I'm not a heathen!" declared Dick indignantly. "My grandfather was a bishop. He wore a skirt!"

"My grandfather had a great-grandfather whose great-grandfather governed all America," remarked Lola quietly. If Dick was going to bring ancestors into the argument, he hadn't a chance of competing.

"One of those chaps who were always being beaten by the English?" asked Dick.

"They weren't beaten!" Lola exclaimed. "And the English were pirates! And when they were caught they were hung!"

"I suppose you haven't heard of Drake," said Dick sarcastically.

"Of course I have! He was a heathen pirate who sacked towns when there wasn't any war going on!"

"He beat the Spaniards anyway," Dick said.

"Of course he did," answered Lola. "Because we weren't expecting him. It wasn't fair."

"Bosh!" said Dick, giving up the argument. "And I'd rather be a heathen pirate than believe there's a ghost in the Cave of the Angels that eats people!"

"Will you stop!" cried Lola, putting her hands over her ears. "I tell you I don't want to talk about it! It's unlucky."

"Fancy being a countess and afraid of ghosts!" jeered Dick.

"Well, if you aren't afraid of them, go and spend a night in the cave!" snapped Lola, her blue eyes flashing with temper.

"I will," said Dick. "I'll go to-night. You see if I don't!"

He marched out of the dairy, whistling. Lola laughed at him till he was out of sight. Then she sat down on the floor and cried, with her head resting on the edge of a tub of milk and her two long black plaits floating on the surface.

Dick had intended to stand watch over the cave in the daytime, not at night. But he had accepted the dare and there was no getting out of it. Anyway, he did not think he would be very frightened. Many a time he had been on and about the

cliffs after nightfall. With Hal he had bathed in the coves by moonlight, and, though it was forbidden, had sometimes slipped out on hot nights to bathe by himself.

"I'll show that dago girl!" he declared, kicking an empty tin that lay in his path so that it shot over the hedge like a bullet.

Dick had a lot of plain commonsense. The one thing that annoyed him about his friends—all except Father Juan—was their superstition. When Pablo wouldn't let him whistle in the boat because it was unlucky, or Paca stuck a needle in his coat to keep witches away, Dick longed to make fun of them. But since he had caught something of the Spanish politeness he never said what he thought. He was wickedly glad that he had to spend a night in the Cave of the Angels; it would shock everybody, and be a kind of revenge for all the times he had kept his mouth shut.

Hal, he knew, would not be home that night. He was far up in the mountains, planning the course of the line which, burrowing under the peaks and spanning the torrents and zig-zagging up the slopes, would link Villadonga and its valley to the rest of Spain. As for Paca, she would be none the wiser if he stayed out all night.

He had supper, sitting all alone at the head of the long, massive dining-table. Then he went up to his room and waited until he heard Paca go to bed. Soon afterwards the sound of her hearty snores rumbled along the corridors of the house. Dick crept down the stairs, which creaked so that anyone but Paca would have been awakened, and explored the larder. He filled a leather bottle with water, and cut himself a foot of *chorizo*, hard, highly spiced sausage that was easy to carry and always tasted better out of doors than it did in the house. Hal had impressed it on him long since that he should never go alone into wild country without food and water; for, said Hal, one never knows what may happen.

"One never knows what may happen," repeated Dick to himself as he slung the leather bottle at his waist and dropped the sausage into his shirt—a bad habit he had learned from Pablo.

Cutting across the fields to avoid meeting any of the villagers, he soon hit the grass track that followed the valley behind the cliffs. Villadonga lay on a narrow strip of low-lying plain, which ran for miles between the cliffs and the mountains. In places there were streams, and fields where cattle pastured, but most of the plain was covered with great white boulders and broken by rocky holes full of sea water which had come up underground. Some two miles inland the ground rose sharply, soaring up to the Cantabrian Mountains—the Peaks of Europe, as the Spaniards call them—which formed an unbroken line of precipices where wolves and boars lived undisturbed. No railway and only the roughest roads crossed them, so that Villadonga was cut off from the world. The easiest way of getting to the villages of the little plain was by sea—but by sea few strangers came. The liners and the deep-sea fishing fleets passed far out, for there were no commercial ports within fifty miles.

Dick easily threaded his way between the boulders and round the coves, for he knew the path. It was about five miles from Villadonga to the Cave of the Angels, and after an hour-and-a-half's walking he guessed he must be close by it. He turned off the path and climbed the gentle slope to his left until the ground

stopped short as if cut by a knife. There below him was the Atlantic, calm and dark save for the white phosphorescent patches where a ripple plashed on a rock or a fish broke the surface.

The cave lay a little to his right, half-way down the cliff. A faint gleam of light shone from its mouth, and instantly Dick dropped on his stomach to watch. Then he remembered St. Andrew—perhaps someone had lighted a candle before the image. He had seen stumps of candles there before. He climbed cautiously down the cliff and peered into the cave. That was it. A candle was burning down in front of the saint, and his thin face, carved by some unknown artist in the Middle Ages, seemed to smile less sternly in the flickering light. As Dick entered the cave the candle went out.

Dick first explored the cave with his flash-light. He saw no more than he had always seen; a hollow running back not more than twenty feet, with bare rock walls on which the pious had carved some short prayers, and the impious their initials. Now that he knew there was nothing in the cave behind him, he sat down at the mouth, with his legs dangling over the sea. It occurred to him that he might be the first person to have spent a night in the cave for hundreds of years. And in that he was perfectly right.

There was no sound in the world but the lap of the little waves at his feet. The silence did not frighten him. He picked out the stars that he knew, and watched the Great Bear slowly wheel overhead as the night wore on. Sometimes he cut a piece of his sausage and chewed it slowly for something to do.

Meanwhile the level of the sea rose. It was one of the two highest tides of the year, the spring tide nearest to the September equinox, and the water rose and rose until it was only a little distance below his feet. He was tempted to dive in and have a swim, for he could easily climb up again; but something held him back. He didn't want to go into the water—not now. He shivered a little, and switched his flash-light on to the back of the cave. It gave him a sense of security to see that St. Andrew was still standing calmly in his place. The tide was at its very height now, and he felt, as men do when the tide turns, that all the shore and the life of the shore were expecting something.

Suddenly the air was shaken by a sound. It was more a vibration than a sound. It was like the noise that a ship makes when the steam is rushing through the siren without enough force to blow it. The air quivered, and Dick thought he heard a high, powerful scream—but on so high a note that it could hardly be heard at all. He peered out to sea, straining his eyes through the darkness. He saw the water break into an arrow of white foam as something cut through it moving fast out to sea. He could just make out a massive object which broke the surface and then disappeared. It looked like a submarine.

The night was silent again. Dick thought that he must have exaggerated the size of the mass that foamed through the water; perhaps it was merely a porpoise leaping and diving in pursuit of a school of fish. But then the waves that curled away from the thing's course broke on a rock near by. Dick, like everyone who sails a small boat, had been tossed about in the wash from a passing steamer. He reckoned that the boat, if it were a boat, that had caused the wash now breaking on the rock, must have powerful engines and be bigger than any of the fishing craft along the coast.

Dick no longer felt that the sea was friendly. He sat down as far away from it as he could get, right at the back of the cave. He was proud of himself, and thrilled at his discovery that there really was some mystery in the waters beneath him. But he knew that he had been in danger, and would have given a lot to know what it was.

Then he thought he heard a voice call his name. It was weird, and Dick was frightened. He froze, holding his breath so as to hear every murmur of the night.

The voice called again:

"Hola, Ricardito!"

This time he recognised it. He ran to the cave's mouth. There below him was a boat, and Lola in it.

"Oh, there you are!" said Lola, trying to keep her voice as matter-of-fact as possible.

"Whatever are you doing here?" asked Dick, amazed.

"I thought you'd be lonely," she answered airily, "so I just came along."

But she couldn't keep up her pretence any longer.

"Ricardito!" she cried, her deep, hoarse, little voice breaking with anxiety. "Are you all right? Tell me you're not hurt! It's all my fault you came here. I'll never forgive myself, Ricardito!"

Dick cut the water in a neat dive, and swam out to her.

"Darn it!" he grumbled to himself. "What does she want to make all this fuss for?"

He hauled himself aboard and sat on the thwart, dripping, and laughing at her.

"I'm glad I'm not alone any more," said Lola humbly. "There wasn't much wind, and I didn't think I'd ever get to you. And then a big boat passed close to, and the wash nearly upset me."

"Did you see it?" asked Dick eagerly.

"No," Lola answered. "The drunken pigs didn't carry any lights."

"Are you sure it was a boat?"

"What else could it have been?" replied Lola wonderingly. "But didn't you hear it, Ricardito?"

Dick hesitated a moment before he answered. He decided to tell his story only to Hal. He did not want to get all the villagers excited; it would spoil his chances of solving the mystery.

"I heard something that sounded like steam escaping," he said guardedly.

"Yes, that was it—a nasty, powerful, thin sound. It was horrid, not like any ship I've ever heard. I'd have got under the bedclothes if there had been any," said Lola.

Dick was suddenly struck by her amazing courage. Believing in all sorts of devils that he didn't believe in at all, she had yet sailed out to the Cave of the Angels in the middle of the night. And she had dared it not from sheer pride like Dick, but because she felt that she had landed a friend in a mess, and that it was up to her to see him through it.

"Lola! You've got guts!" exclaimed Dick in English.

"What does that mean, Ricardito?" Lola asked.

Dick, without thinking, translated the words literally into Spanish.

"Of course I have," said Lola calmly.

Dick blushed furiously in the darkness.

"I mean you're a brave girl," he explained.

"Oh!—even if I *am* a countess!" remarked Lola, giggling.

"I didn't mean it when I said that—about countesses being afraid of ghosts," apologised Dick.

"Well, I'm sorry I said you were a little heathen," Lola replied.

There was a silence of several minutes while each of them thought what a good companion the other was. Then Dick, puzzled, asked:

"What made you so sure that I would really come here?"

"Silly!" answered Lola in her deep voice, looking as wise and motherly as was possible for a girl of her age. "I know you. If you said you'd go, go you would."

The breeze freshened, for dawn was not far away. Lola was caught unawares, and the mainsail swung over with a crash. Dick jumped for the tiller and stood out from the cliffs, with the water singing a happy song as it gurgled under the bows.

"Why, this is Pablo's boat!" exclaimed Dick as he felt how she answered the helm. "Did you take it without asking him? He'll be furious if we don't get it back before morning."

"And if mother finds out that I'm not in bed, she'll be furiouser," said Lola.

"You'd better run back by land," Dick suggested. "Then nobody will be awake when you get in. I'll take the boat back."

"I won't walk at night," said Lola flatly. "I'm frightened. That's why I came by sea."

"It will soon be light—look!"

The dawn was coming up; a red and angry sky.

"All right," Lola said. "I'll just make it if I hurry."

Dick went about, and ran in close under the cliffs.

"Jump!" he yelled.

Plaits and legs flying, Lola jumped and landed safely.

"Good-bye, heathen dear!" she cried. "See you this afternoon?"

"You bet you will, Lolita!" answered Dick.

The wind was coming out of the dawn; then it veered to the north-west, freshening every minute. Sailing close-hauled, Dick stood well out to sea to clear Offering Key. The boat shot from wave to wave in a smother of foam, and Dick sang at the tiller from sheer joy in the movement. After a while, he stopped singing, jammed the boat into the wind, and took in two reefs. She sailed more easily now, but still the wind rose, and the western sky turned from pearl grey to black. Just off the Key the first squall hit him. The rain lashed his face and the wind laid the boat over on her beam ends. At the same time a big, leisurely, white-capped roller came over the bows with a crash, and filled the boat with three inches of water.

"This won't do," said Dick to himself. "I can't make it."

He wore the boat around, taking a shower of spray as he did so, and ran before the wind. He hadn't a very clear idea of what he was going to do, but it was obvious that he could not face those seas in a fifteen-foot dinghy. Tearing towards the cliffs, he thought it out. His best chance was to run for a cove beyond the Cave of the Angels, and beach the boat. He put the helm down and raced back on the course he had come. When a wave bigger than its grey companions bore down

upon him, he swung the bows into it, as Pablo had taught him, rode triumphantly over it, and then continued his course.

He was now nearly opposite the cave, and much too close to the cliffs for his comfort. The waves were pounding and spouting on the shallow ledge where Pablo had dived for the anchor the day before. Dick, desperate, tried to tack, but the boat hung in the trough of a wave, and the next caught it and hurled it towards the cliff. The tide, the spring tide which had nearly reached his feet as he sat in the cave, was falling fast; any wave now might fling the boat on the bottom. Dick fought manfully to keep off the lee-shore. The gallant boat took the heavy seas like a steeplechaser going over hurdles, and even with death before his eyes Dick felt a wild pleasure at the way she answered his small hand on the tiller. But it was a losing battle. For every yard he made he was flung back two.

Still, there was a chance. Dick ran straight for the shore, tossed madly by the waves which, without order or discipline, were leaping up and down over the ledge. He meant to wreck the boat and jump for it, as Lola had jumped two hours before. He looked over his shoulder. Coming down from the north was a wave such as he had never seen. It caught up the spouting water in its course and carried it forward in a great, grim, orderly mass, topped with white. Dick tried to go about and ride over it, but he was too late. It curled over the boat, shutting out the sky. Dick drew a deep breath. The wave fell.

He went down under the weight of water, down and down, waiting for the rock bottom which would smash him to pieces. Whirled back and forth, head over heels, and ever downwards, a thought sprang into his mind as clearly as if he had heard Father Juan's voice:

"Fifty fathoms and no bottom! Fifty fathoms and no bottom!"

The whirling stopped. With bursting lungs he shot upwards like a cork. The water around him was no longer white with dizzy streaks of foam and bubbles, but jet black and smooth. At last, at the limit of his endurance, he came to the surface. He filled his lungs again and again with the precious air, treading water meanwhile. It was pitch dark. A great oily swell was heaving him up and down. Too dazed to know or care what had happened to him, he struck out feebly into the blackness.

Chapter 2

ON the morning of Dick's disappearance, the steam-launch SAN JOSÉ went down with all hands. She was a deep-sea fishing boat of a type used all along the north coast of Spain; an undecked wooden launch, fifty feet long, with the simplest kind of steam engine amidships. These launches looked the most top-heavy craft, for a brightly painted boiler, topped by an unwieldy funnel, stuck up high above the sides of the boat. Actually, they were wonderfully seaworthy. The weight of engine, water, and fuel acted as ballast, and they could roll, pitch, and waddle through heavy seas without shipping a drop of water. The most frequent accident was the parting of the funnel stays. In that case the funnel went

overboard, and the crew came back from the voyage as black as negroes from the blinding smoke.

The SAN JOSÉ would not have been seriously troubled by the gale that wrecked Dick Garland. She had gone down in the flat calm before dawn. She belonged to the fishing fleet of Zumaya, a port in the Basque country two hundred miles to the east. The fleet had been working out of sight of land, with the SAN JOSÉ sailing about two miles closer to the shore than the rest. They saw her masthead lights and the faint glow of her furnace. Then the lights suddenly vanished. A moment later they heard a dull thud, followed by the roar of the exploding boiler as the SAN JOSÉ went under.

Cutting their nets adrift the fleet steamed to the spot at full speed. Nothing was left of the San José but a few oars and casks floating on the water. The ERREGUIÑA raced to the port of Villadonga to get help and information from the local fishermen. The rest of the fleet stood by, steaming to and fro in spite of the rising storm. Those Basques felt that they owned the seven seas. Their ancestors, trained by the grey gales of the Bay of Biscay, had shared the north Atlantic with the Vikings long before Spain or England had ever dreamed of sea power.

At sunrise a busy crowd was gathered on the waterfront of Villadonga. Several of the larger boats were preparing to put to sea. Blue-shirted men, stolid and careful, were overhauling the running gear. The women hurried back and forth between the quay and the cottages that lined it, clearing the boats of nets and baskets and bringing dinner pails to their husbands. The ERREGUIÑA rocked importantly at the quay-side, while her captain, roaring Basque curses at the laziness of all Spanish officials, hammered at the door of the village postmaster, who was also the telegraph operator. The little man protested feebly from under his bedclothes, but, finding that this unreasonable seaman would not let him sleep, at last appeared at the door in his night-shirt. Hearing what the captain wanted, he vanished inside again and grabbed his official gold-braided cap, as if he could not send a telegram without it. Then, clad only in the cap and his night-shirt, he scampered down the village street to the post office with the captain pounding heavily after.

One telegram, in Spanish, went to the harbour-master of Zumaya, reporting the loss of the SAN JOSÉ. A second, in Basque, was addressed to Ramon Echegaray, Harbour Café, Bilbao. The captain did not know where Echegaray lived, but he knew where he invariably was to be found in the afternoon. The telegram read

> SAN JOSÉ sunk with all hands seven miles northeast by north of Villadonga. Apparent cause uncharted rock or submerged wreck but no trace of either. Sea dead calm. Can you explain.
>
> Olazábal, master S.S. ERREGUIÑA.

Strolling back to the quay, Captain Olazábal found Pablo waiting for him. Pablo, knowing the local waters better than anyone else, acted as a sort of non-official pilot for the port on the rare occasions when any strange craft visited it.

“Good-morning, señor capitan”, said Pablo. “How do you do?”

“Well, I thank you,” answered the captain firmly. “And yourself?”

“Well, thanks be to God.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Pablo Candelas, at your disposition,” said Pablo.

“Olazábal of Zumaya, who seeks only to be of service to you,” replied the captain, not to be outdone in politeness by any barbarous Asturian.

The ceremonies now being duly completed, Pablo exploded:

“I spit in the milk ! Captain, half an hour ago I’d have been with you. Am I not Pablo Candelas who will help his fellows up to the last drop of his blood? But some robber, the son of a robber, whose mother was a stupendous dog, and whose grandmother defiled her grey hairs with banditry, has stolen my boat! *Carajo*, what a life! As the song says, one mystery is followed by another. Now let me hear, captain! *Ay!* This villainous mother of ours, the sea—what has she done now?”

The captain told him. Pablo cross-examined him in questions which, for all their eloquence and profanity, showed that he knew his coast. Before long Olazábal was treating him with that respect which a ship’s captain only gives to a skilled pilot. They looked a reckless pair; Pablo, short and swarthy, with gold rings in his ears, had all the swagger of a pirate; Olazábal, tall, massive, and grey-eyed, had the calm confidence of a man who is sure of his physical force. Olazábal used to open bottles by tearing off the cap with his teeth. Pablo knocked off the necks with one dexterous flick of his knife.

As they talked, Pablo saw Lola running from the direction of the cliffs; running, running over the bridge and on, staggering utterly spent down the village street, until she collapsed in his arms. He laid her on a pile of brown nets, his arm under her head. As she fought to get back her breath, she looked like a long, silver, graceful fish, gasping out its life.

“Who is she?” asked Olazábal.

“La condesita de Ribadasella,” answered Pablo. “The little flower of our country.”

Lola opened her eyes.

“He’s caught on the lee-shore,” she panted, “off the Cave of the Angels. Hurry, Pablo!”

“Who’s caught?”

“Ricardito.”

“In the name of all the saints!” exclaimed Pablo. “What’s he doing there?”

“Quick! Quick!” cried Lola. “I’ll explain as we go. Let’s take this big boat.”

She sprang to her feet and jumped into the ERREGUIÑA. Olazábal looked at her in admiration.

“A countess indeed!” he said slowly. “Act first and talk later—that was the way of those who made Spain.”

He snapped a crisp order in Basque. The mooring rope splashed on to the water. The engine throbbed into life. Olazábal and Pablo vaulted over the edge of the quay into the already moving boat.

“Tell Doña Mariquita where her daughter is!” yelled Pablo to the onlookers.

Before they were halfway down the river Lola had told the whole story—how she had taken Pablo’s boat and sailed to the Cave of the Angels, and how on her way back by land she had run up to the edge of the cliff to see how Dick was faring in the rising wind.

“When he couldn’t make Offering Key,” she said, “he went about and ran back along the coast. He was being driven nearer and nearer to the cliffs, and when I saw I couldn’t help him I ran to find you. Has he got a chance, Pablo?”

“How long is it since you saw him?” asked the fisherman.

“Less than an hour ago.”

“An hour, and another hour before we can reach him—even I, Pablo Candelas, could not keep afloat once I was on the ledge in a north-west gale. Be brave, condesita.”

“Oh, Pablo!” cried Lola. “Why, why did I take your boat?”

“As the song says,” remarked Pablo, shaking his head sadly, “love knows no law.”

The ERREGUIÑA was out of the river now, and plunging madly. She was slightly larger than the other boats of the Zumayan fishing fleet. She had a deck-house just forward of the engine containing tiny cabins for Olazábal and his engineer. On top of it was a bridge and the wheel. The broad stern was decked over for a distance of about twelve feet, forming cramped but comfortable quarters for the crew of five. Otherwise, she was just a long, open boat. Her funnel and upper works were pale orange, and the hull olive green.

Olazábal ordered full speed, weather or no weather, and even Pablo held his breath as the launch swooped dizzily down into the trough of a wave, looking as if she must surely go through, and not over, the next one. But this was the weather for which ugly little ERREGUIÑA had been designed. She revelled in it.

“So do the Americans amuse themselves at Coney Island,” said Olazábal with a grin, as ERREGUIÑA slid with a sickening lurch from the crest of a big sea, rolled through a complete semicircle, and then sat down on her stern.

He had once taken ERREGUIÑA to the cod banks of Newfoundland for a bet. Then he and his crew had gone to New York with their winnings, and in three days of heroic *juerga*—which is Spanish for a binge—had spent the lot on the shutes and switchbacks at Coney Island. Captain Olazábal never forgot it. As for his fellow citizens of Zumaya, they never had a chance to forget it.

Opposite the narrow strait which separated Offering Key from the mainland, Olazábal raised his eyebrows, looking an unspoken question at Pablo.

“Hard a starboard!” yelled Pablo. “We’ll put her through!”

He went to the wheel, which Olazábal instantly gave up to him.

“Dead slow!” commanded Pablo.

“Dead slow!” repeated the engineer.

The strait was sown with jagged rocks, and so narrow that Lola often swam across it in calm weather to lie in the sun on Offering Key. In storm, it seethed with mad, white water. So impossible was the passage that Dick, although he could not get round the Key, had never even thought of attempting the strait.

Lola covered her eyes. Olazábal lit a pipe and, with the sweat streaming down his forehead, sat watching Pablo. ERREGUIÑA shuddered and quivered as the current tore her this way and that. A line of black rock and white water closed the passage halfway through. Pablo swung the boat broadside on to the current.

“Slow astern!”

“Slow astern!” echoed the engineer.

ERREGUIÑA tore down on the rocks, backing all the while towards the mainland. In an instant she was between two lines of spouting water.

"Full ahead!" ordered Pablo.

ERREGUIÑA dashed towards Offering Key, Pablo fighting to keep her straight between the reefs. With the bows almost touching the Key, he span the wheel and put her hard a starboard. There was a horrible rasping sound as a rock tore a sliver of wood off the planking, but ERREGUIÑA shot through the gap, and out into the open sea.

"I suppose fishermen don't live very long in Asturias," said Olazábal as he took over the wheel again.

"It saved us twenty minutes," replied Pablo, "and I'm pretty fond of this Ricardito. As the song says, friendship knows neither age nor nation."

"Man, don't think I'm complaining!" answered Olazábal. "I was just interested, that's all!"

ERREGUIÑA rolled her way along the coast and was soon opposite the Cave of the Angels.

"Can I take her in any closer?" the captain asked.

"Better not," answered Pablo. "Give me your glasses. If there's hair or hide of him to be seen, I'll make it out from here. And don't think I'm forgetting the SAN JOSÉ. It's a likely place for her bones. Things get swept in this direction," he added grimly.

Pablo searched the coast with the glasses. There was no sign of Dick, but it surprised him that there was no wreckage. Then Lola, who had been watching the water closer to, cried:

"Look!"

Pablo followed the direction of her outstretched, trembling arm. There, heaving up and down on the waves, was a mast with a bit of torn sail attached to it. Olazábal ran up alongside, and the crew hauled it aboard.

"Is it?" asked Lola.

Pablo nodded.

"Poor Ricardito!" he said.

They cruised up and down the coast for two hours more. Meanwhile search-parties had reached the spot by land and were climbing about the cliffs looking for Dick.

At last the ERREGUIÑA headed out to sea to speak to the fishing fleet. The other captains intended to return to Zumaya, but agreed that Olazábal should remain a week or more in Asturian waters to pick up what information he could about the loss of the SAN JOSÉ. At three in the afternoon the ERREGUIÑA was back at Villadonga. All the way Lola had sat hunched up in the bows, her head resting on her knees, staring desperately out to sea.

There was a crowd on the quay waiting for their arrival. Paca, her black Sunday mantilla on her head, was weeping loudly and being comforted by Lola's mother. Doña Mariquita tried to put her arms around her, but they were little, delicate arms, and Paca was very tall and stout; it looked as if Doña Mariquita were holding Paca up rather than trying to draw her closer. Lola ran to her mother and the two stood side by side and hand in hand, white-faced, dry-eyed, with set, red lips, looking extraordinarily alike. Just so they had stood when the news came

that the Count of Ribadasella had fallen in action at the head of his battalion in Morocco. Just so the Countesses of Ribadasella had heard of the violent deaths of sons and husbands at the taking of Granada, in the loss of the Armada, in Flanders, and in the two Americas.

Hal, back from the mountains, went on board the ERREGUIÑA with Father Juan.

"Well?" he asked.

"Wrecked—I spit in the milk!" answered Pablo. "But we haven't found his body, and we've only found the mast of the boat. We won't give up hope yet."

The postmaster pushed his way importantly through the crowd of little boys surrounding the Erreguiña.

"Telegram for you!" he said to Olazábal.

The captain opened it. It read:

> "Deeply regret loss of SAN JOSÉ. Cannot explain yet. Wire exact state of tide at time of foundering.
>
> Echegaray."

"The old one knows something," said Olazábal. "But, *caray!* What matters the state of the tide when the SAN JOSÉ had five hundred fathoms of water under her keel? Hola, Señor Candelas!"

"What is it?" asked Pablo, looking up from a deep conference with Hal and Father Juan.

"Echegaray wants to know the state of the tide at three this morning. About the top of the spring, wasn't it?"

"Half an hour after the turn."

Olazábal wrote out a reply, and sent it "urgent."

"Who's Echegaray?" asked Father Juan.

"A shipwright," said Olazábal simply, "and a Basque. His family have built boats ever since there was anyone to sail them"

"*Carajo!* The coldness of these Basques!" exclaimed Pablo. "That's all he can find to say of the Echegarays, when everyone knows that the first of the family married a woman of the sea people, and that the toes of every eldest son are webbed like a duck's. On one night of the year a porpoise swims into Bilbao harbour—"

"*Vaya*—what a porpoise!" interrupted the captain. "He must swim in fuel oil and feed on boiler plate!"

"A porpoise swims into Bilbao harbour," Pablo continued, repeating a tale his grandmother had told him of the Echegarays, and adding to it freely from his own rich imagination, "and takes the eldest Echegaray on his back. And the Echegaray visits all the ships with Basques aboard them and chases the flying fish so that they jump out of the water into the pot in the cook's galley. And he visits all the ports where there are Basques in gaol— yes, caballeros, all the ports in the world!—and brings them water from the Bidasoa to cool their heads. He even went to Coney Island, and mistaking Captain Olazábal for a hogshead of wine, he drank him, and thus carried him back to Bilbao in safety!"

"And the porpoise?" roared Olazábal. "The porpoise, barbarian?"

“As the song says,” replied Pablo, “the best horse cannot carry two riders. The porpoise bought the Harbour Café and stayed ashore from that day on.”

They all laughed, even Lola who was listening at the quayside. Pablo meant them to laugh. There was work to be done, and he did not want them to set about it despairingly. Dick’s fate must be discovered, and the loss of the SAN JOSÉ explained.

“Hal, why don’t you go and see Echegaray?” suggested Lola, who didn’t believe in the porpoise, but wasn’t at all sure about the webbed feet. “He might be able to find Ricardito.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t much hope, little one,” said Hal.

“He isn’t dead,” Lola cried. “I know it. I’m quite sure. I feel he needs us awfully badly—and I couldn’t feel that if he were dead.”

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings cometh wisdom,” quoted Father Juan. “My son, I don’t want to give you any hope when all my reason tells me there can be none, but I’d go and see Echegaray if I were you. Captain Olazábal wants to speak to him, I know, and you can go together. Be sure that meanwhile we’ll keep up the search for Dick night and day.”

“ Echegaray can’t do anything for Dick,” said Hal hopelessly, “ but if I can help the Captain to solve his problem, lord knows I’m at his service.”

“Then off with you!” said Father Juan cheerfully.

“In the ERREGUIÑA?” asked Hal.

“Naturally, Señor Garland,” answered Olazábal.

“Not on your life!” Hal exclaimed. “It would take us three days to get there and back. Why don’t we call Echegaray on the telephone?”

“He won’t use it,” replied Olazábal, chuckling. “If you want to see him, you can see him. If you don’t want to see him, why talk to him? Thus says Echegaray.”

“All right,” said Hal. “Then let’s get Bilbao airport on the phone.”

He strode down the street to the post office, where the only telephone in the village was located. It was an event when any private person used it, an unheard of event that he should talk to so distant a town as Bilbao, and an incredible event that he should want to talk to an airport. All the inhabitants of Villadonga at once pretended that they had business in the neighbourhood of the post office, and stood around listening. The postmaster obligingly opened the office windows so that they could hear what was going on.

The line was clear and there was no delay.

“*Oiga*, Bilbao!” said Hal. “*Oiga! Oiga!*”

“Bilbao speaking.”

“Señorita, give me the airport please … is this the airport?”

“It is—and at your service, caballero.”

“Have you got a seaplane in the harbour …? You have! Good! Can you send it at once to Villadonga to take a party of three to Bilbao?”

The Bilbao official consulted his charts.

“I think so,” he answered, “if you’ll clear the infernal fishing boats out of the fairway. How’s the wind?”

“How’s the wind, Pablo?” asked Hal.

“North-west and steady. Gale’s going down,” replied Pablo.

Hal repeated the information.

“The plane will be at Villadonga in about two hours,” said the voice at the other end. “Don’t forget the fishing boats!”

It might have been difficult to persuade the villagers to tidy up the estuary, but when Father Juan pointed out that whatever the plane hit would most certainly be smashed to atoms, the fairway was cleared of boats, mooring buoys, spars, fish-traps, and the miscellaneous floating possessions of the village within half an hour.

Meanwhile Doña Mariquita had taken Hal and Pablo home with her. The three ate an early supper on the vine-covered terrace behind the house, while Lola slept the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Doña Mariquita was touched by Hal’s courage and self-control, and grateful for them. Her eyes filled with tears till they looked like two dark pools, much too big for the little delicate face beneath them and the thin, jet-black line of her eyebrows above.

“How good you are, Don Enrico!” she said gently. “And you too, Pablo. Neither of you have had a word of blame for Lola.”

“But it wasn’t the kid’s fault,” answered Hal, who was always just. “It was wrong of her to take Pablo’s boat, but she really believed that Dick was in danger in the Cave of the Angels, and she meant to see him through it. Then the storm came, and Dick was out of luck.”

“Luck, nothing!” exclaimed Pablo. “I should have told him what to expect on this coast when the dawn wind shifts from east to north-west. I, Pablo Candelas, am to blame!”

He crashed his hairy fist on to the table.

“Child!” said Doña Mariquita, smiling. “How could you teach him in two years all you have learned in forty?”

The deep drone of the seaplane sounded overhead. The pilot shut off his motor and came spiralling down like a white gull on to the river. The propeller roared into life again as he hit the water and shot downstream between two clouds of spray. Then he taxied slowly back, and came to rest opposite the quay. All the boats in the village immediately put out, and circled round the plane at a respectful distance, as if it were a creature of uncertain temper which might suddenly take it into its head to scatter them.

Hal and Pablo said good-bye to Doña Mariquita and amid the cheers of the whole population rowed out to the plane with Olazábal in the ERREGUIÑA’s dinghy.

“I don’t think I can fit in,” said Olazábal hopefully, looking at the light basket chairs in the cabin, which were certainly not built for a man of his proportions.

He sat down, forcing his way between the arms of the chair, and strapped himself in with great caution.

“This will end badly,” grumbled the captain, frowning at the slender wings with deep distrust.

Meanwhile Pablo had made friends with the pilot. He clambered over the floats, examined the propeller, peered into the cockpit, and insisted on feeling and testing the controls.

“*Hombre!* You’d make a grand airman!” said the pilot, impressed by his quick and steady hands.

Pablo grinned.

"Listen you!" he said to Olazábal. "I'm going to sail it to Bilbao. He has said so!"

Olazábal, who feared this might be true, looked so appealingly at Hal that the Englishman burst into a roar of laughter. He hauled Pablo into the cabin, and shut the door behind him.

The seaplane sped with a roar down the fairway, shot over Offering Key, and turned eastwards along the coast. For quarter of an hour the low cliffs and the long, narrow plain lay below them. Then the grey mountains sprawled across the end of the plain and fell sheer into the sea. They saw how completely Villadonga was cut off from the world.

The air off the broken coast was bumpy. The plane dropped a hundred feet, with the sensation of a fast lift getting under way. Olazábal clutched the arms of his chair, and looked anxiously around him. They flew steadily for a bare minute, and then the supporting air again vanished from under them. Hal, who had got his air-legs long since, was hardly aware of the movement. Pablo seemed to enjoy it. But the face of the indomitable Olazábal, which usually looked as if it had been cut out of dark oak with rather blunt tools, turned a curious shade of olive green.

Another air-pocket... Again the feeling that the bottom had dropped out of the world !

Olazábal, whose ERREGUIÑA was capable of every possible movement except this, laid his head on one great paw and waved the other protestingly in the air. The plane danced up and down as carelessly as a fly on a summer evening.

He swallowed violently; he heaved; he uttered one curse that could be heard above the deafening roar of the motor; then, for the first and only time in his life, Captain Olazábal gave up his recently eaten dinner to the fishes.

They shot past the crags of Montaña, and the caves decorated by artists of the stone age with pictures of prehistoric animals. They raced over the lights and liners in the harbour of Santander. They roared into the Basque country at Castro Urdiales, and the dancers on the village green stopped to look heavenwards at the white plane. Then they saw the huge, bare hills of iron ore that surround Bilbao, the glare of the blast furnaces, and the scattered ships and warehouses stretching ten miles up the river from the outer harbour to the town.

The seaplane whooshed into the water of the harbour, where the mythical porpoise came to fetch the Echegarays, and taxied up to the river mouth. It was a Saturday evening, warm, and with the velvet dusk turning to night. There was no noise of industry; only the music of the bands playing in the faintly lit plazas on either bank of the river, and the laughter and happy voices of girls and men.

Chapter 3

HAL and Pablo climbed down into the motor-boat which met the seaplane. Olazábal, feeling like a man sentenced to death who has been reprieved and can't believe it, stared stupidly at his beloved element, the sea. Greeting it with his whole body, he plunged in and rolled kicking and snorting about the harbour. At

last, looking once more like the captain of the ERREGUIÑA, he clambered aboard the boat.

"Friend," he said to the boatman in Basque, "have you got some other clothes at home?"

"Surely—and at your service," answered the boatman.

He took Olazábal to his cottage, while Hal and Pablo waited at the railway station. The seamen of the Basque coast did not feel that there was anything personal about their clothes. The parts of their dress were interchangeable, like the spare parts of Ford cars. In less than ten minutes the captain was at the station, wearing the regulation blue trousers, much too tight for him, rope sandals on his feet, blue beret on his head, an orange shirt, and, as it was Saturday night, a coat. The three took the electric train to Bilbao, and twenty minutes later were strolling through the broad but crowded streets to the Harbour Café.

Of all the men sitting at little tables on the pavement outside the café, Hal had no doubt at all which was Ramon Echegaray. Stout and compact, his beret cocked rakishly over one ear, his hands resting on the handle of a long stick, he sat with his knees wide apart, gazing genially at the passers-by. He was well dressed in solid cloth but, as was the custom among Basques of the middle class, he wore no tie round his smart collar. He had a powerful nose which twisted in all directions before arriving at its tip. His freshly-shaven cheeks were full and kindly, and puckered with odd little holes and wrinkles. His square chin jutted forwards and upward like the bowsprit of a ship.

He looked straight at Olazábal without showing a sign of surprise. Echegaray believed his own eyes and believed what he was told. That was why the Basque fishermen came to him with their troubles, and why Basque officers of naval and merchant ships sent him extracts from their logs whenever there was anything curious in them. The result was that wild and weird tales of the sea found their way into Echegaray's notebooks. In his storehouse of knowledge there were many errors and false observations, but there were also solid facts which had never been noted on any chart nor in any handbook of navigation.

So now Echegaray did not doubt the evidence of his senses, and calmly accepted the sudden appearance of Captain Olazábal.

"Good!" he said. "Good! So the ERREGUIÑA has grown wings!"

"She has more sense!" answered Olazábal. "We came in a machine."

He introduced Hal and Pablo to Echegaray, and the three sat down at the table.

"I am very pleased to meet you, sir," said Echegaray to Hal in slow but correct English. "If there is anything I can do for you while you are our guest in Spain, you have only to call on me."

"Man! How many languages do you speak?" exclaimed Pablo, who considered anybody who spoke more than one as marvellous a creature as a person with twelve fingers instead of ten.

Echegaray grinned at him like an old sorcerer, and replied in the almost unintelligible dialect that the villagers in remote parts of Asturias spoke among themselves:

"I have built boats for every fishing people. I have received writings from every fishing people. I talk the talk of every fishing people."

“And that, señores, is true,” said the white-aproned waiter proudly. “I have heard him with these ears.”

Hal instantly loved the powerful old shipwright. He could well understand how legends had grown up about him. Not only had Echegaray the miraculous art of building stout launches of the finest timber that were yet within the reach of a fisherman’s purse, and slim racing yachts that seemed to find wind where no wind was, but he had the magic of wisdom and kindliness. Men could and did confess the inmost secrets of their hearts to Echegaray.

Hal told him shortly the story of Dick’s disappearance. Don Ramon listened, from time to time asking a keen question which showed that he saw in his imagination, as clearly as if he had been present, the battle against wind and tide and cliff.

“It’s a strange thing that you couldn’t find the wrecked boat,” said Echegaray when Hal had finished. “If ever we were to see your brother alive,”—he looked at Hal with deep pity in his wrinkled grey eyes, as much as to say that he believed Dick to be dead—“I think he could tell us what happened to the SAN JOSÉ.”

“The SAN JOSÉ was nowhere near the cliffs, Don Ramon,” said Pablo.

“She was not. But your coast is a mysterious coast, my Asturian friend, and it must do its work no longer.”

“*Carajo!* Has it done it before?” exclaimed Olazábal.

Echegaray rolled a cigarette between his long, gnarled fingers.

“Remember the FLOR DE MAYO?” he asked.

“Sunk off Llanes in March, 1910,” answered the captain. “Loss unexplained, and no survivors.”

“And the launch SANTA MARIA?”

“Sunk by a German submarine in March, 1917, off Villaviciosa,” Pablo replied.

“So it was said—but no submarine would waste torpedoes on a fishing boat. Then there was the yacht DAPHNE—I designed her, the sweet ship—found floating bottom up off the Cabo de Lastres in September, 1930. And now the SAN JOSÉ”.

“What’s the connection between them?” asked Olazábal.

“This. All four were lost in calm weather a few hours after the highest spring tide of March or September.”

“And all on the night tide,” Pablo remarked.

“All on the night tide,” agreed Echegaray. “I never noticed the coincidence until I looked through my records to see if I could solve the mystery of the SAN JOSÉ. Then I wired Olazábal, and he replied that the SAN JOSÉ had been lost only half an hour after the turn of the tide. That suggested an idea.”

Echegaray drew a rough map of the coast on the marble-topped table.

“Here is where the SAN JOSÉ sank—ten miles from Villadonga, and half an hour after the turn.

“Here the FLOR DE MAYO—twenty miles from Villadonga, and an hour after the turn.

“Here the DAPHNE was lost—about forty miles from Villadonga, and two hours after the turn.

“And here the SANTA MARIA—fifty miles, and, so far as we can tell, two and a half hours after the turn.

“Of course we don’t know the exact time and place that any of them went down, and I’ve made these figures look a lot more simple than they actually are. But they do fit the few facts that came up at the official enquiries. What do you make of it, Olazábal?”

“A plague on your mathematics!” said Olazábal, whose glass had been steadily refilled by the waiter. “It’s a volcano on the bottom.”

“I thought of that,” replied Echegaray quite seriously. “But if it were, the effect would be felt on land—and it isn’t. Don Enrico, have you any theory?”

“I’m no seaman!” said Hal, shaking his head.

“And you, Señor Candelas?”

“To me,” answered Pablo, mopping his brow after a struggle with simple arithmetic, “it seems that something starts from Villadonga at the top of the tide and moves out to sea at twenty miles an hour. But there’s no such thing.”

“Friend,” said Echegaray, “there is such a thing, because it *does* move away from Villadonga at twenty miles an hour. And now, what is it?”

“Whatever it is,” Hal remarked, “it can’t happen every March and every September, or Pablo would know about it.”

“He might not,” Echegaray answered, “for the fishermen of that coast don’t stay out much after dark— especially at the equinoxes when the weather is nearly always bad.”

“We don’t,” Pablo confirmed. “Many a good man and boat have been lost in March and September.”

“And how many of them were really sunk by storm, we can’t tell,” Echegaray pointed out. “I’ll bet you that your coast goes mad twice a year as regularly as clockwork. Seventy times out of a hundred there are no boats in the way and nobody suffers. Twenty-five times out of a hundred somebody does suffer, but the loss is put down to the equinoctial gales. Five times out of hundred—say, once every ten years—there’s a disaster in a dead calm, and the loss cannot be explained.”

Echegaray cleared his throat, and looked around the café with a fiercely challenging stare.

“They said the DAPHNE—” he began, and then stopped as if the words stuck in his throat. “They said the DAPHNE turned turtle because no yacht of fifty tons could possibly carry so much canvas. They had the darned impudence”—he blew out his cheeks and pounded on the table so that the glasses jumped like live things— “they had the darned impudence to say that her designer didn’t know his job!”

A shocked silence fell on the Harbour Café for fully ten seconds. Waiters and customers alike were well aware that only one subject could draw such fury from their beloved Don Ramon. “The DAPHNE” they whispered, “he’s talking of the DAPHNE”.

Olazábal chuckled to himself—he knew that Echegaray would never rest until he had solved the mystery of the SAN JOSÉ now that he had decided it was connected with the loss of the DAPHNE.

“I saw a whirlpool in the Orkneys once,” said Olazábal, apparently changing the subject.

“You told me,” grunted Echegaray.

Then he recovered his geniality and turned to Hal and Pablo.

"Olazábal's whirlpool was about a ship's length in diameter and moved rapidly across the water, like one of those whirls of leaves and dust you see on land. It might be something of that sort which is causing the trouble on the Asturian coast. Isn't there any tradition in your village which could help us, Señor Candelas?"

Pablo hesitated.

"I don't say no," he answered at last.

"What?"

"Man, it's nothing!"—Pablo was ashamed of having his superstitions dragged out in public—"A children's tale! We have a cave, the Cave of the Angels. It's supposed to be unlucky."

"Ah! Now I remember!" exclaimed Echegaray. "There's a sort of ship's graveyard below it, isn't there? Well, many coasts have those places, so it needn't mean much. But that is where we'll start our investigation."

"Are you coming back with us?" asked Hal eagerly.

"I certainly am," said Ramon Echegaray. "We'll take the machine you came in."

"No!" cried Olazábal with a wail like a wounded bull elephant.

Echegaray smote him between the shoulder blades.

"Sit here and drink, then, till the ERREGUIÑA comes to fetch you!"

"That," Olazábal said, "is just what I'm going to do."

The three left him there. They sent a wire to Father Juan, asking him to have some flares set on the banks of the Villadonga river to light the fairway, and then took a taxi down to the outer harbour. Half an hour later the white seaplane was roaring through the night westwards to Villadonga.

Dick's first thought as he swam blindly forwards on the smooth, heaving water was one of vague surprise that he was alive at all. He was not yet quite conscious, and was swimming just because it was second nature to him to swim. He could not see his arms. He could not see the water. The swell swung him up and swung him down again, and rumbled away into the darkness with little splashes and sucking noises and deep moans. His second thought was a strange sadness. He felt more lonely than he had ever felt in his life. He felt as if he had died.

After a while he bumped his head against a rock. The slight shock woke him up. He swam along the barrier, following its course with groping hands, and came to a little ledge. He hauled himself out of the water and sat on the ledge, limp and weary. Two bulky objects inside his shirt felt cold against his skin; they were his flash-light and the sausage. Dick felt comforted. Here was something belonging to the sunlit, outside world which he seemed to have left for years and years, and had actually left ten minutes before.

He switched on the flash-light. The shaft of light went a very little way, and made the darkness seem larger and even more unfriendly. He could see that he was in a cavern. The damp and slimy rock wall against which he leaned curved forward over his head, but the light was not strong enough to show him how high the roof was, nor how far away was the opposite wall. He turned the beam on to the water, which heaved sullenly up and down, covering his knees at the top of the swell, and at the bottom leaving his feet dangling in the air. At the very limit of the

beam he saw something which looked like a great back sticking out of the water—a grey shape in the darkness. The grey shape wallowed in the swell and came a little nearer. Then he recognised it. It was his boat, or rather Pablo's, floating upside down.

Dick slid off the ledge and swam to it, holding his flash-light before him lest he should lose all sense of direction. He clambered on to the keel of the boat and sat astride. The stout planks between his legs gave him a feeling that he was not quite alone; it was as if he had brought a little bit of Pablo into the cave with him. Thinking of Pablo made him feel less helpless. He started wondering what that capable seaman would do if he were there.

"As the song says—" began Dick.

But he couldn't think of any of Pablo's proverbs which applied to his particular case; so he made one up for himself.

"As the song says," remarked Dick to himself, "better a boat's bottom than no boat at all."

He kicked lustily with both feet and drove the boat along, using his flash-light to light the way. In a few minutes patches of foam appeared on the water. The swell became jumpy and less regular. Then a smooth, treacherous eddy caught the upturned boat and whirled it around so suddenly that Dick nearly lost his balance.

"I must be over the hole I came in by," thought Dick. "This doesn't look too good."

He turned and paddled back again, away from the sea.

Once in smoother water he began to explore his prison, driving the boat from side to side. He calculated roughly that the cave was about seven boat's lengths across. The roof he could not see, but as he went farther into the recesses of the cave it came within the range of his flashlight. It got lower and lower. Dick became horribly certain that the roof and the water were going to meet, shutting him in for ever. Soon he had to lie face downwards on the keel, while the wet rock bumped against his back. He hated to hold the light in front of him, for fear that it would show the end of the tunnel; at last, it did.

Dick was so determined to go forward and get out that he nearly took to the water in the wild hope of swimming into the depths until he could work his way up again. But then it occurred to him that if this passage were really the only way out of the cavern, the air would be bad. And the air was not bad. It was stale and damp and filled with a pungent smell of wet minerals, but it did not make him feel ill.

There was no room to turn. He pushed the boat backwards out of the tunnel until the passage widened, and then hunted back and forth for the opening he had apparently missed. He found it easily enough—a ragged, black cleft which had been screened from him as he approached from the other side by a buttress of rock. Beyond this opening, the passage became tortuous and irregular, but remained comfortingly high. Now and again it led through pot-holes, like bubbles in the rock. Dick gave up trying to paddle the boat along with his feet, and pushed it forwards by running his hands along the wall of the cave. It moved very slowly, for it was heavy and barely afloat. He lost track of time and distance altogether, for

often, following the wall, he went halfway round the pot-holes when he might have cut straight across them. The swell had almost disappeared.

After several hours Dick saw a faint, grey glow of light ahead of him. He jumped to his feet and yelled with excitement. The boat naturally slid from under him, and his enthusiasm was momentarily quenched in the stagnant water. He climbed back on to the keel, and hurried towards the light.

Turning a last corner, he found himself in a craggy, misshapen cave, dimly lit by the daylight filtering through a narrow cleft high above him. A massive rock, weighing thousands of tons, had fallen from the roof into the water. It closed the whole channel except for a passage so narrow that the little boat could hardly scrape through it. The face of the rock opposite Dick was perpendicular and covered with barnacles and slippery weed. It was quite unclimbable. Dick pushed the boat through the narrow gap between the wall of the cave and the rock, and examined the other side of it. This face was even worse for it was much higher and overhung the water, so that nothing but a fly could possibly climb it.

The underground channel ran straight on beyond the rock, but Dick had had enough of it. He reckoned that he must be nearly under the first slopes of the mountains, and that the farther he went the less likely he would be to find another opening leading to the surface. Besides, the water had begun to smell; a smell of decay, but very ancient decay; like the odour of an old church with a stench of fish added. Dick decided that he was not going to leave that patch of daylight which promised safety.

"I'm going to climb that rock or die!" he exclaimed aloud.

Then it occurred to him that his exclamation was perfectly true. He would have to climb that rock or die.

He worked the boat back through the narrow passage to the other side of the rock—that to which he had first come. It was not such a terrible barrier as the far side, but he saw no hope of getting up it.

Almost crying at his helplessness before this vast, merciless lump of stone, he looked at it desperately, examining every crack and tuft of weed. Suddenly he gave a little shout of joy, for he had noticed the mark left by the morning's high tide, barely six feet below the top of the rock. He had only to sit on the boat and the afternoon tide, which was already making, would lift him slowly up to the high-water mark. He reckoned that by standing on the keel he could then just get his fingers over the edge of the rock.

Now that the worst seemed to be over, Dick felt hungry. He pulled out his sausage, which was none the worse for being soaked in salt water, and ate ravenously half what was left. With the water in the leather flask at his belt he was more careful, for he did not yet know how he would get off the top of the rock once he was on it. The tide rose, with an invisible but steady movement like the minute hand of a clock. Dick wanted to keep track of the rise, so he carefully marked a large barnacle on a level with his eyes and then looked away while he counted up to one thousand. When he had reached the thousand, he looked at the barnacle again, and found that his eyes were now some eight inches above it. Thus the hours passed until the water was within a foot of the high tide mark of the morning. Dick decided to count a last thousand. He picked a barnacle, looked away, counted, and then looked back. The water had risen a bare two inches, and

the ebb had begun. The tide had turned without nearly reaching its record mark of the morning. It would not reach it again for another six months.

Dick sprang to his feet, for now or never he must try to reach the top of the rock. He gathered his legs under him and jumped. He caught the edge with the tips of his fingers, and hung for a second until his grip slipped. Plunged into the water, he lost precious minutes climbing on to the boat and working it back into position. Again he jumped. The boat slid from under him, and he crashed against the side of the rock. He tried once more, grabbed, and hung on. The edge was sharp and formed a good handhold; but the rough rock, rasped the skin from his fingers before he could pull himself up, and he fell back. Then he tried to scale the rock, using the barnacles and the tiny cracks as handholds, but again and again he fell back into the water, now tinged with blood from his hands and knees.

Once again he jumped, but the tide was falling fast and he could not even reach his handhold. He struggled back on to the boat and lay face downwards on the keel, helpless and moving feebly like a little animal which is going to die. He thought of the skull he had held on his knees the day before, and shivered. The memory of the skull brought the anchor to his mind.

"Is it still there?" he wondered.

It probably was, lashed carefully to the locker and made fast by one of Pablo's slip-knots.

"The anchor…" thought Dick. Something was taking shape in his mind.

Then the idea came to him clearly. Dick's unconquerable spirit flared up again, giving new strength to his limbs.

Drawing a deep breath, he dived under the boat and came up inside it. He felt his way to the bows, and when he found the little anchor where it ought to be his heart gave a leap of joy. He loosened the knot and let the anchor whiz to the bottom. Then, with the slack of the rope gathered in his hand, he shot up to the surface.

Balancing himself on the keel of the boat, he hauled up the anchor, carefully coiling the rope. He grasped it with both hands a yard from the shank, and swung the light anchor like a pendulum, back and forth, and back and forth, and twice round in a circle, and then launched it through the air. It soared high over the edge of the rock and crashed to the ground with a clank that reverberated through the cavern. Dick pulled on the rope cautiously. The anchor dragged a little way and then caught firmly in a crack. It held. He swarmed up the cable, and in a minute was safely on top of the rock.

He looked up at the narrow rift in the roof of the cave, and saw the branches of a small tree with the sun shining on them. The patch of light wavered before his eyes. The cave revolved around him, growing blacker and blacker.

"Darn it!" whispered Dick, looking for a soft place to fall.

Then he fainted.

When he came to, he lay still for a long while. All the joints of his arms felt as if they had been pulled from their sockets. The blood was dry on his fingers, but his knees were still oozing a steady flow. He washed them with a little fresh water and bound them up with the tail of his shirt. Then he got shakily to his feet, and took stock of his position.

The top of the rock was worn smooth, and plastered with streaks of evil-smelling mud. On three sides of it was water; the fourth side, the highest of all, was jammed against the wall of the cave below the hole in the roof. Dick thought at first that he could walk straight out to freedom, but then he saw that the top of the rock had crumbled away on the landward side, leaving a V-shaped chasm between it and the wall of the cave. With a plank he could easily have crossed the top of the V; it was just too wide to jump. He slid down to the bottom of the chasm, hoping to be able to climb up the other side, but the steep slope was faced with brittle rock that crumbled at a touch. At the bottom of the V, however, he found what his weary limbs longed for; a bed of soft, dry earth that had fallen from above.

Dick clambered back on to the rock, took off all his clothes, wrung them out, and spread them opposite the hole to dry. Then he ran around in circles to get warm. The cave was damp and chilly, but a little of the heat of the evening blew in through the rift, and his teeth soon stopped chattering.

His next task was to invent some method of signalling where he was to the outside world.

"Shipwrecked mariners," said Dick, "always use their shirts—and if I'm not a shipwrecked mariner I'd like to know who is."

He knotted the ends of the sleeves and filled them with pebbles. Then he swung the weighted shirt around his head and sent it flying through the hole to land in the branches of the little tree, where it hung waving gallantly in the wind.

Even so, Dick knew that he was in serious danger. He guessed that all Villadonga would be searching the sea and the cliffs for his body, but he had no hope that they would look inland. His only chance of deliverance lay in some passing shepherd or farmer; but the far side of the plain, where he reckoned he must be, was very desolate, and none might pass in months. And if somebody did pass, he would probably think that the torn old shirt had been blown into the tree by the wind.

He hated the thought of spending a night in the underground channel, for he suspected that out of it had come the uncanny movement which he had seen while on watch in the Cave of the Angels.

"But it's no good my being afraid," said Dick. "I've got to stay here, and that's that."

He put on his shorts and sweater, which were nearly dry, and slid down again into the bottom of the V-shaped hollow. He dug a hole for his hips and another for his shoulders, as Hal had taught him to do when camping on bare ground, and snuggled down into his nest. He noticed that he was completely hidden from the water and from the top of the rock, and felt much more secure. The light faded from the patch of sky. Dick fell into a dreamless sleep.

The instincts of a twelve-year-old are much sharper than those of a grown man, and Dick's were particularly keen. He was awakened by two or three gobbets of mud dropping on to him from the rock above. His sleepy impulse was to roll out of the way, but instinct cried: "lie still!" And still he lay. The tide, now high again, was lapping and plunging against the sides of the channel for no apparent reason. Dick knew that if he had woken up one minute earlier he would have seen or heard what it was that disturbed the water. He was very glad that he had not

woken up. The lapping of the waves slowly died down. No more mud fell on him. But the whole cave smelt as if the ancient bottom of the sea had been turned up and was rotting. Dick lay without stirring a grain of his earthy bed, thinking frantically of all the pleasant things he had ever done, to keep himself from giving way to panic. But so tired was he that all those pleasant things soon merged into dreams, and he fell sound asleep again.

When he woke up, the sun was shining directly into the cave, throwing a bridge of light, that looked almost solid enough to walk on, from the cleft in the roof across to the grim rock. But to Dick it simply measured the distance that separated him, perhaps for ever, from the outside world.

Chapter 4

RAMON ECHEGARAY was up and about at the first glimpse of dawn. He had eaten a remarkable midnight supper prepared by the hands of the admiring Paca, and had slept for five hours, which was all the sleep he ever needed. He did not disturb Hal and he did not call for Pablo. He wanted to get his own impressions of the coast without answering questions or listening to other people's talk.

The blue haze of September hung over land and sea as he strolled along the cliffs. It rolled away before the first determined puff of wind from the Atlantic, and the beauty of the coast opened up like a flower. Don Ramon stood with his short sturdy legs wide apart, and examined it appreciatively. Alone on the cliffs, he had the air of an industrious farmer looking over his fields in the early morning. And Echegaray's attitude was not very different from that of the farmer, for he considered the whole north coast of Spain as his personal property; this was an outlying part of the estate which he did not know very well.

Green and white and pale grey, it was uncommonly beautiful, thought Echegaray. But he did not approve of it. This Asturian coast was too much of a fairyland. He preferred the honest, brown cliffs of the Basque country, the many villages, and the broad stretches of sand. And what was the good of the pale blue sea when there wasn't a ship to be seen on it?

"It's a pretty field," Echegaray would have said, had he been the farmer he resembled, "but we must sow some turnips in it next year."

He continued his walk along the cliffs. A rough semi-circle of white rocks on the plain below him aroused his curiosity, and he strolled down through the long grass to look at them. As he approached, a little white figure with streaming black hair jumped up like a rabbit from under the rocks, and stared at him.

"Hola!" said Echegaray.

"Hola!" said the girl.

"Ramon Echegaray—at your service." The old Basque introduced himself with a courteous salute.

"Lola Pelayo—at yours," she answered.

"And what are you doing out so early in the morning, young woman?"

"I'm looking for Ricardito."

"So am I," said Echegaray.

Lola gave him her most bewitching smile.

"Then suppose we join forces, Don Ramon? You see the land belongs to me, and the water belongs to you, so together we're sure to find him."

"You seem to be very certain, señorita," answered Echegaray, completely disarmed. "Where do you think he is?"

"Where I was looking—in one of the pot-holes."

Echegaray walked around the semicircle of rocks. He found that on the inner side it was shaped like a cowl, overhanging a little miniature beach which sloped down to a pool of sea water.

"Does this belong to your kingdom or mine?" he asked.

Lola looked puzzled for an instant, and then grinned.

"Oh! You mean, is it land or water? I suppose it's on the frontier, your majesty."

Echegaray laughed. He always laughed without opening his mouth, but the wrinkles on his cheeks unfolded and danced and shut, and the twists of his nose wriggled, so that his whole face seemed to be in movement.

"It's good to find a countess with some intelligence," he said.

"How do you know I'm a countess?" asked Lola.

"Yours is a name that every Spaniard knows and honours—even an old republican like myself," Echegaray answered. "Besides, I built the yawl BRUJA for your father. Do you remember her?"

"Just," Lola replied. "But we got so poor that we had to sell her."

"Never mind," said Don Ramon "I'll build you another for the love of it. She'll be a little white witch with a blue line round her, the colour of your eyes, and we'll call her the CONDESITA. Let's see. Slip Number 4 is empty. You shall have her next spring. And now let's get to business. Show me this Cave of the Angels."

Lola led him down into the track that ran the length of the plain. As they skirted the rocky basins and white sands of the coves, Lola felt that not a puff of wind nor a current nor a piece of driftwood escaped Echegaray's notice. She took him up again to the cliffs above the Cave of the Angels, and the two peered over the edge.

"Do you think you can climb down to it?" asked Lola doubtfully.

"Let's see who gets there first," answered Echegaray.

He started with a flying leap on to a ledge beneath him. When he hit it, his legs flexed and straightened as if they had springs in them, and his body bounced like an old leather ball on to another ledge below. Turning his face to the cliff, he went down the rest of the way hand over hand, and swung his body into the cave while Lola was still feeling for her second foothold.

"I was trained in the days of sail, my dear," said Echegaray when at last she joined him, "but *vaya! Vaya!* my wind isn't what it was!"

He puffed and blew and fanned himself with his beret.

Echegaray sat down at the mouth of the cave and fixed his eyes on the water below. He sat there for a quarter of an hour without stirring, as if in a trance. Lola, awestruck, watched him. He seemed to be holding silent communication with the people of the sea. She wondered if legend were true, and he really had webbed feet.

"What are you doing?" she whispered at last.

"Waiting to see if the fish will tell me anything," he replied.

"What fish?"

"Look!" he said. "Follow my finger!"

Lola peered along his arm. She could see nothing but the gentle ripple of the water, the eddies of the backwash, and purple shadows far in the depths.

"I still don't see them," she said.

"The shadows," explained Don Ramon. "They are shoals of fish."

One of the shadows changed direction suddenly in a quite unshadowlike manner.

"Dogfish after them," said Echegaray.

The shoal split. Part of it vanished into the cliff under their feet. The other shadows, barely visible, circled to and fro, then came together into one whole, and streamed into the cliff after the first.

"You see," said Echegaray. "They've told us. There's a cave down there. Are there any of our 'frontiers' inland?"

"I don't think so," Lola replied. "But let's explore."

They climbed back up the cliff, and Echegaray searched the valley below with his powerful glasses. Red cattle grazed in the lush grass. There were neither pools nor boulders. The sea might have been hundreds of miles away.

"Nothing!" he said, handing the glasses to Lola.

Two miles away the ground soared up in a steep slope, over the top of which peeped the jagged sierra. At the foot of the slope and straggling a little way up it was a grove of dwarf oaks with some grey rocks crouching like beasts in the shadow of the trees.

"Don Ramon!" said Lola, without lowering the glasses from her eyes.

"Yes, my dear."

"Did you see that little wood on the hillside?"

"The one with an old blue shirt stuck in a tree? I did."

"Don Ramon, it looks the sort of place where there might be a cave, and—and Ricardito used to wear a blue shirt."

"I never heard of anyone sailing a wrecked boat two miles across the land," said Echegaray, "but this is a crazy coast. Let's go and see."

Climbing low stone walls and jumping ditches, the old shipwright stumped across the plain, while the white Lola flitted along at his side. They entered the grove and worked their way up through the undergrowth towards the shirt.

Two great boulders, carpeted with moss and dead leaves, stuck up a few feet from the ground like the lips of an open mouth. They peered between them. For a moment they could see nothing, since their eyes were accustomed to the brilliant sunshine outside. Echegaray's sight was the first to adjust itself. He saw a huge, irregular rock rising from the depths of the cavern nearly to the mouth, and on the top of it a small figure sitting dejectedly with its head on its knees.

"Good-morning, Don Ricardo," said Echegaray in a very gentle voice so as not to startle him.

As it was, Dick jumped so nervously that he found himself on his feet without knowing how he got there. Then he pulled himself together.

"Good-morning, caballero," he answered coolly. "Can you get me out of here?"

"*Ricardito mio!*" cried Lola.

She dropped down on the dead leaves, and burst into tears of relief.

"Hola, Lolita!" shouted Dick. "I'm feeling fine! Don't cry!"

“Well, I’ll say you’re a cool hand, young man!” exclaimed Echegaray. “Just a minute, and I’ll be with you!”

He stroked Lola’s shoulders.

“I’ve got a job for you, brave girl. Go to Villadonga and tell Hal to bring out some blankets and a long plank at once. I’m going down to warm the boy up a bit. He must be frozen, and the sooner he gets taken care of, the better.”

Lola nodded and, crying good-bye to Dick, ran with her long, light stride in the direction of Villadonga.

Echegaray ducked between the boulders, and launched himself with a powerful standing jump on to the rock. The top of the rock was below the mouth of the cavern, so that it was much easier to get in than to get out.

“Knees good,” said Echegaray, “but wind rotten! Keep away from cafés when you grow up, young man! And now off with those damp clothes!”

Dick grinned and obeyed. Echegaray wrapped him in his own ample coat, and massaged him till his skin tingled. It was half luxury and half agony. Echegaray seemed to know every muscle that hurt him most.

“Now!” said the Basque. “You’re a bit old to sit on knees, but the closer you are the warmer you’ll be!”

He took Dick on his lap, lifted up the bottom of his voluminous blue jersey, and tucked Dick under it. Dick poked his head out of the V of the jersey on Echegaray’s chest, and stayed there looking like a baby on its mother’s bosom—a bosom that smelt strongly, but rather pleasantly, of salt, sweat and tobacco.

“If you’re not too tired,” invited Echegaray, “you could tell me your story while we’re waiting. I’m Ramon Echegaray of Bilbao.”

“*The* Echegaray?” asked Dick, who had heard of him from Pablo.

“Man!” exclaimed Don Ramon modestly. “Just plain Echegaray—and at your service.”

Dick told him his story, while Echegaray listened, fascinated.

“What do you think it was that you saw from the Cave of the Angels?” he asked when Dick had finished.

“I think it was a submarine,” said Dick.

He would have hesitated to say that to anyone else for fear of being laughed at, but Echegaray was different.

“It might be,” agreed the old shipbuilder. “Whatever it was, it sunk the SAN JOSÉ.”

“What was the SAN JOSÉ?” asked Dick.

So Echegaray told him how the fishing launch had gone down inexplicably in a dead calm.

“Could it have been a whirlpool that you saw?” suggested Don Ramon.

“No,” replied Dick definitely. “It was something which cut through the water. Lola felt the wash of it, and thought a steamer had passed.”

“What about an eruption of volcanic mud under water? That might happen at the time of an exceptionally high tide.”

“Perhaps,” answered Dick doubtfully. “It let out a whoosh like all the steam in Spain blowing off.”

“Well,” said Echegaray, “ now that we know where it comes from, we can find out what it is in a day or two. The holes in this Asturian coast look as if they might dive plumb to the eternal fires, and fill the devil’s bath-tub for him.”

He borrowed Dick’s flash-light, and let the beam rove around the walls of the cave.

“This rock makes our search a bit easier,” he said. “The sea has never gone over the top of it, and nothing of any size or force could get around it. So the source of the trouble must lie between here and the sea. I’ll sound and chart the whole channel along which you came.”

“Dick!” yelled Hal from outside the cave.

Dick wriggled frantically within the jersey, and Echegaray lifted it to let him out.

“Hal! Hal! It’s good to see you again!” he cried, prancing up and down on the rock with excitement.

“One! Two! Three!” chanted hearty voices outside.

At “three” a heavy plank shot through the mouth of the cave, and fell with one end on the rock. Dick and Echegaray marched over the bridge to freedom.

Father Juan, Pablo, Paca, and Lola were there to greet them, and half the village besides. Hal and Dick grinned at one another sheepishly, each knowing what the other was thinking and both determined not to make a scene in public. Paca caught Dick in her arms and wept over him, much to Dick’s embarrassment. Pablo, who was volleying curses of joy at the heavens, slapped him on the back much harder than he meant to; and Father Juan put his arm around him, and blessed him in grave and gentle Latin which Dick did not understand— though he loved to hear Father Juan’s voice anyway. Lola, gazing at Dick with wide eyes, put out her hand and just touched him with her finger-tips as if to make sure that he was really there.

“I can never thank you enough, Don Ramon,” said Hal, shaking his hand.

“Nothing to thank me for, amigo!” answered Echegaray. “I might have looked for your Ricardito all my life and not found him. I expect the sea to be where it ought to be—off the coast. But she whose ancestors owned this land, she understands it. Lola told me where to look. Lola found Dick. Caballeros, three cheers for Dolores Pelayo, Countess of Ribadasella!”

“*Viva la Condesita! Viva! Viva!*” they yelled.

Hal wrapped Dick in blankets and carried him down the slope to the ox-cart that was waiting. The two white oxen laid their great foreheads to the yoke and ambled home with a rolling walk, neither quickening it at Pablo’s hoots of encouragement nor slowing it when the cart, creaking and swaying, jammed in a rut or mounted a rock with two of its wheels. They are independent beasts, oxen.

Hal and Echegaray put Dick to bed, while Paca went to the kitchen to concoct some horrible drink of herbs which was an age-old secret in her family. She brought it in, a tepid, brownish-green liquid, and set it on a table at Dick’s bedside while she gathered up the blankets from the floor.

“Must I drink it?” asked Dick under his breath.

Echegaray smelt it like an expert, and held it to the light.

“Yes,” he whispered in answer. “The old witch knows her business.”

Dick drank it and choked, but kept it down. Then Hal sat with him till he slept.

Don Ramon raided the larder, for he was very hungry. When Paca returned to her kitchen after busying herself about the house, she found him sitting on the table with a large flagon by his side, consuming a pair of cold pigeons.

"May it profit you!" said she—the invariable polite exclamation of Spaniards on seeing somebody else eating.

"Have some!" Echegaray said, offering her the other pigeon.

"Have the goodness to tell me what you are doing in my kitchen!"

"Why, woman!" protested Echegaray in surprise, "I'm only eating."

"Aye—eating the pigeons that I had prepared for the master's lunch, and he starving and wondering whether the boy will live."

"He will," said Don Ramon calmly.

"Who told you so? He will, says he! Of course he will, but what business is it of yours, foreigner?"

"Woman—" began Echegaray with his mouth full of pigeon.

"Woman, indeed! I am Doña Paca—at your service— and when you want anything of Doña Paca, go into the living-room and ring the bell like a Christian, instead of tearing the food from the fire!"

"It wasn't on the fire," said Don Ramon weakly.

"Of course it wasn't! Do you think I would roast my pigeons twice? *Madre mia*—these Basques! What men for arguments and discussions! Now he would teach me how to cook!"

Echegaray stood up and prepared to assert himself.

"Very respectable señora—" he began.

"That, yes!" snapped Paca. "Thanks be to the saints! No one can say a word against my virtue. I may be an old witch—but respectable, yes!"

"Doña Paca," apologised Echegaray, seeing what was the cause of the trouble, "I beg you to forgive me. It was a manner of speaking——"

"A pretty manner!" exclaimed Paca with bristling eyebrows.

"A manner of speaking," continued Don Ramon. "When one says 'witch,' one naturally says 'old witch.' The two words are married to each other. My aunt, Doña Paca, was the most dashing woman in all Biscay, and yet they called her an old witch!"

"But she *was* a witch," answered Paca, somewhat softened, "and I'm not."

"You surely are, Doña Paca, for you have bewitched me. And were I twenty years younger I would convince you of it without caring this much"—here Echegaray snapped his twisted fingers like a pair of castanets—"for your respectability!"

"*Mi madre*, what creatures men are!" exclaimed Paca, giggling. "Glad I am that you're not twenty years younger, Don Ramon, for I don't know how I should resist you."

She turned away to hide her pleasure among the pots and pans, and Echegaray, who believed in keeping on good terms with the cook of any house where he happened to be staying, slipped out of the kitchen taking the flagon with him.

For the next fortnight Echegaray and Pablo were underground from sunrise to sunset. They rigged a derrick on the rock in the cavern, raised Pablo's boat, patched it, and used it for the exploration of the dark and smelly channel. The entrance to the cave resembled a mine shaft. Beneath the oaks lay baulks of timber, torches, lines and leads, picks, and coils of rope. Villadonga quayside had

no loungers on it in the late afternoons, for such was their curiosity that they all strolled out to "the works" as they called it, and lounged on the hillside.

"They're no longer afraid of the Cave of the Angels," remarked Father Juan, "now that they know there is something there to be afraid of."

Meanwhile Dick was recovering. After sleeping for twenty hours, he woke up so stiff that he could not move. Two days of Echegaray's rubbings and Paca's medicines put him on his feet, and in two days more he was living a normal life. It was a very exciting life, for he spent his afternoons holding the other end of the tape for Don Ramon and Pablo, and learning to sound till he could sing out the depths in the melancholy voice of an old sailor.

The ERREGUIÑA had gone to Bilbao and come back with her captain. Dick and Olazábal took to each other at once, and within half an hour of their meeting were swapping reminiscences of Coney Island and Blackpool, and inventing amusement machines which, if they could ever have been constructed, would certainly have made their fortunes. Both of them became a little impatient with Echegaray's painstaking measurements of the underground channel, his charts, tide tables, and cross sections. The novelty wore off for the villagers too, and they returned to their usual habit of lounging on the quay. Even Don Ramon himself, finding nothing whatever of interest, was proposing to give up the search for the time being, and to return to Villadonga for the big spring tide the following March.

"Dynamite—*caramba!*" roared Olazábal as he and his men sat in the village tavern. "Dynamite is what you need!"

"Barbarian," said Pablo, "have you no respect for science?"

"That for your science!" answered Olazábal, driving his knife clear through the table. "You can't lay ghosts with a tape measure! Send the cave to the angels where it belongs!"

Father Juan found it very difficult to keep Dick's attention on the morning lessons. It was not in his nature to be severe unless he was very sure that severity was justified; so he sought about for new ways and means of interesting his pupil. There was an ancient iron-bound chest in the vestry of the church, filled with worm-eaten books. Father Juan, like most of his predecessors in the parish of Villadonga, had glanced through them, and, finding nothing but lives of the saints, monastery chronicles, and works of mediæval theology, had let them lie. They had been printed by a 16th century printer who evidently did not know a good manuscript from a bad one. Their Latin was the dog-Latin of ignorant monks—a conversational language that anybody who was familiar with Spanish and had the elements of Latin grammar could read without much difficulty.

Father Juan selected a Life of St. Andrew, and tried it on Dick the next morning. Dick slowly read a page, amazed at the ease with which he could understand it.

"Padre!" he cried. "It's a miracle! I've learned Latin at last!"

Father Juan smiled.

"I doubt if Julius Cæsar would have understood it as well as you," he said. "Still, it is Latin of a sort, and I'm proud of my pupil."

And for the rest of the morning Father Juan told him how the monks of the Middle Ages lost and then won back the knowledge of good Latin, until Dick felt he would rather have been a scholar than a knight-errant.

In the afternoon Father Juan went up to the oak grove to see how Echegaray and Pablo were getting on. Dick, fascinated by the new language that seemed to have suddenly come to him, decided to read some more of the Life of St. Andrew; it was a lively story, anyway, full of myths, miracles, and adventures. To play the part of a scholarly monk more thoroughly, he chose to read in Father Juan's library rather than in the garden. There, he was surrounded by carved oak panels and high shelves of books in brown leather bindings. The room was full of shadows, save where the shafts of sunlight driving through the little panes of the windows turned the brown to a deep orange.

With the back of a high oak chair towering above his head, and the dusty volume spread out on a desk in front of him, Dick read slowly on and on until he came to a point where the narrative did not make sense. He looked back, and saw that he had turned over two pages at once. When he tried to separate them, he found that the edges had been lightly gummed together. He prised them apart with Father Juan's silver paper knife, and discovered between them a vellum manuscript covered with tiny, neat writing in characters that he had never seen before and could not read. The words were not divided at all. At the foot of the manuscript were two additions in other hands. The last was certainly Spanish, but he could make out little except a date—1557—and the words *cueva en un robledo*, meaning "cavern in an oak grove."

The rest of the afternoon he spent hunting through the book to see if there was anything in it that would give him a clue to the meaning of the manuscript. But it was still a mystery when at sundown Father Juan, Pablo, Echegaray, and Olazábal all trooped into the library.

"Look at my scholar!" said Father Juan proudly.

"He studies more than an archbishop," echoed Pablo.

Don Ramon and Olazábal winked at each other behind the backs of the two Asturians.

"To-morrow morning," said Olazábal, well knowing that Dick took his lessons in the morning, "we're going to fit a new propeller to the ERREGUIÑA. Want to see it done, Ricardito?"

Dick jumped up with sparkling eyes.

"May I, Father Juan?" he asked eagerly.

Father Juan looked sadly disappointed in him, and Don Ramon and Olazábal roared with laughter.

"Mechanics!" exclaimed the priest, now laughing himself. "Illiterate mechanics! But I'll bet you Ricardo has got more out of his afternoon than you out of yours!"

"You win, padre!" said Dick. "Look what I found in the Life of St. Andrew!"

Father Juan took the manuscript.

"Hola, this is interesting!"—he looked at it under a magnifying glass—"My son, it's a page from an eleventh century chronicle!"

"What's it written in?" asked Dick.

"Latin; and in the curious cursive script of the time. It looks like—*caramba!* It's about a Villadonga that existed before this one!

Chapter 5

FATHER JUAN slowly read the manuscript through to himself, while the others looked over his shoulder. Then he translated it aloud:

"These things having been suffered, the elders of the haven went to Count Roger of Ribadasella, he being lord of all the plain and their protector against the Moors, and begged that he would permit them to depart from the haven and leave the site of their village desolate.

"Now, the said count was a scoffer, and damned to all eternity, for he beat Brother Sebastian when he found him in the castle cellar, though the said Sebastian had been locked in by misfortune and had become inebriated solely with the smell of the liquor."

"Hm'm!" said Father Juan. "I suspect Brother Sebastian of being the writer, so we shall hear nothing good of poor Count Roger."

"The elders being assembled in the great hall, Count Roger called on them to produce witnesses who should testify to the evil fortune of the haven. And they answered him truly: 'Most noble lord, there is no need of witnesses. It is commonly known among all thy people that many have died of the perils of the sea and of bestial hunger.' Then did Roger the Count rise up in wrath and bellowed, saying: 'Shall I abandon my coasts to the Norsemen and the Basques, and shall I give up my tithes of fish, because ye come to me with old women's tales?'

"And he battered with his axe upon the high table so that all were afraid.

"Then up spoke one Thomas of Leon, swearing that he had seen a mermaid. On that the count pressed him closely, asking him whether she had dark or golden tresses, and many other questions that would have occurred to none save to this beastly count. And upon Thomas answering that her tresses were of gold, our lord asked him why he had not brought the said mermaid to his castle, seeing that all things found upon the foreshore belonged to him as of right.

"And he fined the said Thomas one bushel of wheat.

"Then a Moor named Omar who built the count's galleys swore that he had seen a great fish. To him answered Count Roger that there were indeed great fishes in the sea and that none should know it better than he, Roger of Ribadasella, who had sailed to the country of the Franks and back. Whereupon he asked the Moor whether he were a Christian or no—a question that was not wont to be of interest to our lord—and upon the Moor replying that there was one God and Mahomet was his prophet, Count Roger smote him with his fist, and he was buried in his sins.

"So the witnesses, of whom there were yet many, deemed it more prudent not to say what they had seen, and the elders departed. And shortly

afterwards, Count Roger being slain in battle with a black oath on his lips, they burned the village to the ground and left the coast deserted."

"That's the end of the eleventh century part," said Father Juan. "Now come two codicils. The first says:

"Read and noted. Let an image of St. Andrew be placed in the Cave of the Angels. (signed) Aloysius, Abbot of Leon, 1332 A.D.

"The second, which is in Spanish, says:

"Francisca Urrieta, burnt by the Holy Office for witchcraft and for worshipping at a cavern in an oak grove, delivered me this paper before she died. She assured me that it was of great importance, and that it referred to a village supposed to have existed formerly on the site of Villadonga. I cannot read it. It appears to have something to do with the ancient image of St. Andrew. I am therefore filing it in the church copy of his life. (signed) Antonio Menendez, priest of the parish of Villadonga. In the second year of the founding of of the village, 1557 A.D."

Pablo was the first to break the silence.

"No wonder we thought the Cave of the Angels unlucky," he murmured. "Where there is a stink, there are always noses!"

"Aye!" said Echegaray. "But Mother Urrieta—a country woman of mine, to judge by her name—was the last to know why those villagers deserted the coast and what the Cave of the Angels had to do with it. Now, I have inherited a little knowledge of the ancient religion of the Basques,"—as a matter of fact Echegaray had inherited very much more than a little—"and I can say that there are only two things which Mother Urrieta would have worshipped at that hole in the oak grove. One is a spirit of the dead, and the other is… *Dios mio!* I've got it! Am I blind? Have I forgotten? I *know* what's in that underground channel!"

He spoke rapidly to Olazábal in Basque. He seemed to be asking Olazábal's opinion before he went any further. The captain was clearly surprised at Echegaray's hesitation, and nodded his head vigorously.

"Pardon me, amigos" said Don Ramon. "Our Basque traditions are very sacred to me, and I am about to tell you things which perhaps I had better keep to myself. Olazábal, I'm glad to say, agrees with me that it must be done."

"May we know what the other thing is that Mother Urrieta would have worshipped in a cave?" asked Father Juan.

"Just read me one passage again, padre," replied Echegaray. "What was it that was commonly known among Count Roger's people?"

Father Juan referred to the manuscript.

"That many had died of the perils of the sea, and of bestial hunger," he said.

"Could that mean the hunger of the beast?"

"It could," answered Father Juan, looking closely at the line through his magnifying glass. "Indeed, I think it must."

“Then I will tell you a story,” said Echegaray. “The first part of it is legend. The sequel to the legend has only just occurred to me. Mother Urrieta was worshipping a large snake or lizard in that cavern.”

“Go ahead,” said Father Juan.

“The Basques are a very religious people,” began Don Ramon. “Consequently they loved their old pagan faith as well as they love the Church to-day, and they stuck to it long after the rest of Spain had accepted Christianity. In the time of Count Roger there were still plenty of pagans in the Basque provinces and the remote parts of Asturias. They secretly worshipped the spirits of earth and water and woods, and they believed that these spirits often took the shape of beasts.

“This secret worship, as Father Juan well knows, lasted into the 16th century. The Holy Office, according to their lights, were quite justified in burning Mother Urrieta. She was what they called a witch—in other words a woman who continued praying to the old gods. She probably had certain very limited powers, which appeared supernatural, and I expect she admitted at her trial that the devil sometimes visited her. The devil did—but he was merely the high priest of her religion, wearing his ritual costume of a bull’s horns and tail.”

“I have heard,” Father Juan interrupted, “that through sons and adopted sons the line of priests never became extinct, and that there is still someone who possesses all the ancient knowledge.”

“That seems incredible in a modern civilisation, padre,” replied Echegaray casually.

“It does,” Father Juan agreed. “Of course I realise that the—er—high priest is probably a very good Christian, but I would love to know just what knowledge he has inherited.”

“Who knows?” growled Olazábal uneasily. “And what has this to do with the Cave of the Angels?”

“Plenty,” Don Ramon replied. “It’s the prologue to my legend. Once upon a time, they say, the sea-god was angry because he had very few worshippers left in Asturias to do him honour. So he sent beasts to punish the people. What these beasts looked like, I don’t know. The old women fill in the details, but they make them up as they go along. Anyway, they were terrible creatures. The fishermen dared not put to sea, and even on land they were not safe, for the beasts would raid the huts on the seashore.

“Well, we have just heard how the Christians abandoned the coast—but the pagans did not. Their elders sailed east to the Basque country to ask advice of the high priest, who told them that they must offer sacrifice to the beasts. Very practical advice, I should say, for so the creatures would eat what they were given instead of what they chose to take. But I do not think the high priest could have realised the poverty of his few faithful Asturians. They lived only in the remotest parts of the shore and the hills, and they had very little livestock for sacrifice.

“They offered what they had, however. Once a month, on the darkest night, the faithful rowed out to a flat rock in the sea, towing cattle and sheep behind them. These they left on the rock, and the beasts came and devoured them. Doesn’t that suggest how Offering Key got its queer name?”

“Good lord! ” exclaimed Father Juan.

"Well, the few cattle they had were soon eaten up," continued Echegaray, "so they chose a girl to die for the people. There is a story, of course, that the girl was rescued. But she wasn't—she was eaten. When the high priest heard of the human sacrifice, he was horrified, and he prayed to all the gods who lived up there—" Echegaray shot out his arm towards the open window, and through it they saw the clouds gathering like great ghosts on the Peaks of Europe "—begging them to deliver the people from the wrath of the sea-god. The gods heard his prayer, but they might not kill the sea-god's pets. So they decided to imprison them. With a shaft of his lightning the god of the gods shattered the entrance to the beasts' den, and closed it for ever."

"I expect the high priest did it himself," said Dick irreverently.

"*Hombre!* It's only a legend I'm telling you!" exclaimed Echegaray.

"Well, you told it as if it were true, Don Ramon," said Dick, "and I don't see why it shouldn't be, all except that stuff about the gods."

"I don't see why it shouldn't be, either, Ricardito," Don Ramon answered, "and I dare say the high priest did have something to do with that rock falling into the channel. Though how he managed it I haven't any idea—unless he did it by the sheer force of prayer."

"And now what is the sequel to the legend?" asked Father Juan.

"Here's what I think it is," Echegaray replied. "If any of you have a better theory, stop me.

"The beasts remained in the cave, shut in by that rock on which we found Dick. They didn't starve, for a lot of fish go into that cave. Why, I don't know. But they do. I suggest that the creatures lived and bred and died there for several generations, and that now there is only one of them left."

"Why only one?" asked Pablo.

"Because we have to find a reason why one of the beasts should have got out in recent years, and never before. It wouldn't attempt to get out for curiosity or pleasure, since it knows no life but the cave and the darkness. It wouldn't get out for food, since, if my theory is right, there is enough food right there. But it might be driven to get out by the instinct to find a mate."

"*El pobrecito!*" exclaimed Pablo with true pity.

"Poor thing, indeed!" said Echegaray. "I can imagine it driven by that tremendous impulse to a place it did not know existed for a purpose it could not understand—and trying desperately to get over that rock which closed the only possible way out. At the top of an ordinary spring tide it could nearly make it, but not quite. I can picture it leaping and leaping at the rock, and making the cave quiver with its screams. Then came a high spring tide of March or September, and at last it heaved itself on to the rock, and got out. It swam about, savage and lonely, and after a time returned. It would have no difficulty in returning on any fairly high tide, since the side of the rock which faces the approach from the sea is much lower than the other. I think it came home while Dick was sleeping in the cave. The mud which fell on him was not volcanic, but dropped off the creature's body as it crawled over the rock.

"Well, as the years passed, it learned to wait for the two great tides without making too desperate efforts between whiles. Generally, when it gets out, no lonely little ship has the misfortune to be in its path. But if there is one, it attacks—sheer

savagery, probably, like a stag in October. Evidently the creature can jump out of the water like a seal, and its weight alone would be enough to overturn the SAN JOSÉ or the DAPHNE,"

"But such a beast as you imagine," objected Father Juan, "would be a hundred feet long, and heavy in proportion."

"It is," said Don Ramon. "Ask Ricardito!"

They all turned to Dick.

"Yes," said Dick. "The thing I saw fits Don Ramon's description. I never dreamed it was an animal. It was so big."

"For heaven's sake let's be sane," said Father Juan, stroking his white hair. "With your imagination and your gods and your witches, Don Ramon, you charm away all our common sense. Now, seriously, your whole theory is preposterous!"

"Why?" asked Don Ramon.

"Because in the first place your dragons are just a fairy tale, and in the second place, if we knew what grain of truth there is in the tale, they would turn out to be sea-lions, or sharks, or some other familiar beasts."

"I admit it's all very improbable," said Echegaray, "but the theory fits the facts—and then I have no doubt at all that there are a few large reptiles left in the sea which we know little about."

"Sea serpents?" asked Father Juan, smiling gently.

"I don't like the word!" exclaimed Echegaray. "I don't like it! There's never a year but some fool reports he has seen a sea serpent, and it always turns out to be a school of porpoises or a bank of floating weed or a giant squid travelling on the surface with one of its arms waving in the air. But give the sea serpent another name, and he becomes much more probable. Let's call him a sea crocodile, for example."

"It's queer how we are influenced by names," remarked Father Juan. "I don't find so much difficulty in believing in a sea crocodile. But is there any evidence for it?"

"Evidence!" snorted Olazábal. "Evidence! You don't want evidence, padre, for what everyone knows! My father's cousin heard the thing, and Captain Allarte fished up part of one off the Grand Banks!"

"Captain Allarte," said Echegaray, "was believed to have hooked a transatlantic cable. And your father's cousin—may he rest in peace!—died under the impression that pink sea snakes were crawling up his bedposts!"

Olazábal sat bolt upright, and stared at Echegaray indignantly.

"He was very sympathetic," declared the captain, "and he loved me dearly."

"No doubt he did," agreed Echegaray calmly. "But he once mistook the moon for the sun in working out his position, and decided that he had arrived in the south Pacific after twelve hours sail from Zumaya."

"It is human," remarked Pablo, feeling it his duty to support his friend's father's cousin, "to err."

"It is," Don Ramon said. "And so I believe everything I hear when I hear it, but I test it pretty carefully afterwards. Now I have first-hand evidence from men I trust that a thing like an enormous sea crocodile has been sighted off Graciosa in the Azores, and off the south-west coast of Sumatra. There is a fairly well attested case of such a beast being seen in the Gulf of California, but the classic instance

is the creature sighted off the West African coast by the British warship DÆDALUS. It was seen in broad daylight by all the men and officers of the watch, and they described it exactly. It had a long, powerful neck and a smallish head. They couldn't be sure of its shape below water, but it appeared to have a thick body propelled by paddles."

"A survival from the age of reptiles," murmured Father Juan. "It seems most unlikely."

"Why?" asked Echegaray. "The crocodiles survived, and the giant tortoise. You'd say they were the most improbable animals if you'd never seen them. And if, as they think, it was a change of climate which wiped out the great reptiles, the most likely to survive would be the free-swimming animals which could seek warmth wherever it was."

"The size of your sea crocodile would be against it," objected Father Juan. "It must be a clumsy brute."

"Yes. A school of barracuda or a pair of grampuses could probably make very short work of it. Good! Therefore there are very few of my sea crocodiles, and they can only live and breed in very protected places—such as the underground channel."

"Well," said Father Juan, "I reserve judgment. I am almost inclined to say like Tertullian, I believe because it is incredible. What are you going to do?"

Echegaray snapped out of his imaginative mood, and became the energetic shipwright of Bilbao. He sat down at the desk and wrote a brief note.

"Captain Olazábal," he said, "I want you to take this to Pedro Torrontegui in the market of Bilbao. It's a request for one crate of oranges."

"Torrontegui doesn't sell oranges," answered Olazábal. "He's the head of the Communist party in the Basque provinces."

"I know he is," said Don Ramon, "but forget it. He's a friend of mine, and he has a kind of orange that I want. Take darned good care of them and don't put the crate near the boiler, or they might get over-ripe. Call at my yard, too, and ask for an outboard motor to fit Pablo's boat. Here are the measurements!"

"Ricardito, you're the best electrician here. Can you and your brother fix me a telegraph? I want a line that the boat can drag behind it as it explores the channel beyond the rock, and instruments so that a party in the boat can communicate with another party at the mouth of the cave."

"Hal and I will see to that," said Dick, "if Captain Olazábal can bring us from Bilbao a mile of cable, well enough insulated to stand being dragged under water."

Olazábal made a note of it.

"And one thing more, caballeros" said Echegaray. "I think you will agree that for the time being none of us should speak of our discovery nor of what we intend to do—except, of course, to our good friend, Don Enrico Garland. And I would like you to forget the name of my revolutionary friend in Bilbao. Do you give me your words of honour?"

"I do," each of them answered.

"How soon can the Erreguiña make the round trip, Olazábal?"

"If I push her, we'll be back about mid-day the day after to-morrow," replied the captain.

"Good! I'll wire the yard to give you coal and any stores and money you need."

The party broke up. An hour later the ERREGUIÑA was foaming out to sea. Hal and Dick were charging storage batteries at their dynamo. Pablo was trying not to talk in the village tavern—a most difficult task, for he looked obviously loaded with secrets. And Echegaray, having stayed to supper with Father Juan, was having an argument with his host, as courteous and merciless as a duel, about the origin of the Basques.

The next day and a half passed very slowly for Dick, although he and Hal worked steadily. They made two buzzers and tappers, and rubbed up their Morse code by telegraphing to each other between the house and the garden. Dick insisted on doing most of the sending.

"My messages will be the most important," he said, "because I'm going in the boat."

"I'll be hanged if you are," answered Hal. "You don't realise that the party in the boat has a slim chance of ever getting out alive—that is, if there's a word of truth in the whole yarn."

"Orders!" said Dick proudly. "Echegaray wants me."

Don Ramon and the two brothers thrashed the question out at lunch on the second day.

"There are three people," said Echegaray, "who have a right to see what is in that cave—and they are probably the only people who ever will. Dick, because he's gone through more than any of us. Pablo, because he represents the fishermen of the coast. And I, because I want revenge for the loss of the SAN JOSÉ and the DAPHNE."

"I don't care, Don Ramon," Hal replied. "I'm responsible for my brother. You'll have to take me, not him."

"And I'm responsible for the expedition," Echegaray retorted. "You know I'd like to take you, but two heavyweights in the boat are enough. And I do want a small third person to look after the motor and the telegraph, for Pablo and I will have our hands full. Your job, Don Enrico, will be to remain on top of the rock at the other end of the telegraph. I'll see that you are armed, for I wouldn't be surprised if you get enough danger there to satisfy even you. Olazábal will be standing by off the Cave of the Angels in the ERREGUIÑA."

Hal still shook his head.

"I'll toss you for it," proposed Dick.

"All right," Hal answered.

Echegaray whipped a coin out of his pocket and slammed it on the table with his hand over it.

"Heads, Dick goes in the boat! Tails, Hal goes! Do you agree, friends and caballeros?"

"Right!" they said.

"Heads it is!" announced Echegaray, lifting his hand and showing the coin.

He did not show the other side of it. That was a head, too. Echegaray had his own reasons for wishing to test Dick's courage and presence of mind.

They were interrupted by two stalwart seamen rolling a drum of telegraph cable up to the door, and two more carrying the outboard motor between them. They were followed by Olazábal, who looked ready for any adventure, with his beret falling over one ear, and an expensive cigar nearly burning the tip of the other.

“The oranges are still on board,” said Olazábal. “Your friend loaded the crate, and told me I wasn’t to move it.”

“Fine!” answered Echegaray. “And now let’s pick up Pablo, and all take a little trip out to sea. We won’t want the crew, captain. Just you and the engineer will be enough.”

They all strolled down to the quay, and went on board the ERREGUIÑA. Olazábal let the crew go, and, after exchanging a few terse remarks with the engineer on the subject of Echegaray’s unaccountable whims, took the boat down the estuary, and on into the open sea.

“We’ll have a taste of the oranges now,” said Echegaray, when they were out of sight of Villadonga.

He opened the crate. The oranges were of fine size, and very carefully packed.

“Beauties, aren’t they?” remarked Don Ramon, choosing one at random, and looking it over with admiration.

He drew a slit around it with his knife, and tore off the skin in two halves, which came apart much more easily than in any ordinary orange. Within was a shining steel ball with a wire sealed to its surface. Echegaray broke the seal, pulled the wire, and swinging his arm over his head sent the ball hurtling into the sea.

There was a flash, a roar, and a great spout of water.

“Food for the beast,” said Echegaray. “You were asking for dynamite, Olazábal, but I expect this mixture will do as well. It’s mostly T.N.T.”

The fruit being satisfactorily tested, they went about and ran back to Villadonga. Before taking the crate ashore, Echegaray selected three of the bombs and left them on board the ERREGUIÑA.

“You’ll be our third line of attack, Olazábal,” he said. “I don’t suppose you’ll see any fighting, but we won’t leave you unarmed.”

Olazábal gave a twist to his beret, and weighed one of the deadly little fruits in his broad palm. Dick looked up at him with awe. The captain could hurl death with the speed and accuracy of mid-off in a Test Match.

They carried the crate up to the house, and laid it, carefully padded, in the ox-cart, together with the drum of cable, the batteries, the outboard motor, a tank of petrol, and an acetylene headlight. Pablo and Olazábal strolled ahead of the oxen, which seemed to be imitating their rolling walk. Dick rode in the cart, while Hal and Echegaray followed behind. They looked like a party of travelling carpenters starting out for a new job.

Pushing, hauling, and yelling to the oxen, they got the cart off the track and up the slope to the oak grove, where they unloaded their cargo. With blocks and tackle they edged the drum of cable through the mouth of the cave and down on to the rock. Hal and Dick mounted it on an axle so that it would revolve freely, and connected the instruments. Meanwhile Pablo and Echegaray attached the motor to the stern of the boat, and Olazábal fixed the headlight in the bows. At sunset they lit naphtha flares on the rock to illumine their underground workshop. When Father Juan, arriving after dinner, peered into the cave, the scene below him with its flames, ladders, and toiling figures stripped to the waist, reminded him of a picture of hell in an ancient bible.

“Hola, padre!” called Don Ramon, mopping the sweat from his eyes.

“Have you got a job for me?” asked the priest.

“Not now—we’re nearly through. But I will have to-morrow. Will you spend a morning with Don Enrico on top of the rock?”

“Surely,” answered Father Juan. “What will be our duties?”

“Did you ever hunt rabbits with a ferret?” asked Echegaray.

“Yes, as a boy.”

“Well, this boat is the ferret. We are going into the hole after our rabbit, and we’ll probably kill in the darkness underground. But if we don’t we may bolt him, and he’ll make for the mouth of his hole. In that case you two will bombard him like a pair of hunters on a Sunday—I mean, Saturday—morning.”

“And if the ferret never comes out?” enquired Father Juan.

“Luck is the master of all, as the song says,” answered Pablo. “Moreover, the ferret has sharp teeth.”

He pointed to the rack of steel balls, now stripped of their disguise.

“Hm’m,” said Father Juan, “I suspected that your oranges would be something of that sort. If ever your friend uses those on human beings, Don Ramon, I’ll consider myself absolved of my promise.”

“When he does use them,” replied Echegaray, “there won’t be any more need of secrecy.”

It was eleven at night before they returned to Villadonga. Paca met them at the bridge, and announced that she had prepared supper for all. She had, indeed. The long table groaned with cold partridges, a whole roast sucking-pig, hams cured in the mountain sun, and great wedges of Paca’s home-made bread. Silent and thoughtful, quite unlike her usual tempestuous self, she hovered around the table, filling plates and glasses. She kissed Dick good-night as tenderly as if she were his mother.

Pablo and Olazábal rolled home arm in arm, each singing a different song and quite unaware of it. Father Juan followed them at a discreet distance. Hal went to bed, and Echegaray was left alone at the table. He put his feet on the edge of it, tilted back his chair, and lit a cigar.

“And now, friend,” he said when Paca came in to collect the dishes, “tell me what’s the matter.”

“Take care of the boy,” she answered.

“Do you think he’s likely to be in danger?” asked Echegaray.

“You needn’t tell me anything if you don’t want to,” said Paca gently, “but I can see from your faces that you have found out the secret of the cave. I don’t know what it is—only that it is dangerous. That much my family has always known. Swear to me that you will take care of the boy, master.”

“Why do you call me master?” asked Echegaray, holding her eyes with a long stare.

“Because I have a little of the ancient knowledge, but you—have it all.”

“I thought you were one of us, but you wouldn’t admit it,” said Don Ramon.

He stood up and raised his hand above his head. His nostrils flared wide, and his face took on the uncanny beauty of a great animal about to spring.

“My blessing be on you, little sister! I swear to you by the blood that our ancestors worshipped that no harm shall come to the boy while I live.”

“Swear to me also on the Cross of our Lord, whom we worship,” said Paca obstinately.

“As a faithful son of the Church, I swear to you also on the Cross of our Lord,” answered Echegaray.

Paca bowed her head in thanks, and left him. At the door she turned back.

“And if you should die, master,” she asked, “is there one prepared to take your place?”

“None is prepared,” said Echegaray sadly. “I have no son, nor have I ever mingled my blood with that of any youth in the rite of adoption.”

“It shall be mingled,” uttered Paca in a strange voice, with her eyes fixed on the rafters above his head.

“Is that a hope?” Echegaray asked. “Or do you speak as one who has seen what shall come?”

“As one who has seen,” Paca answered.

Chapter 6

AT ten in the morning the party were assembled in the oak grove at the entrance to the cave. It was a clear, fresh day with little puffs of wind that travelled over the grass like the shadows of clouds. For awhile they lay and talked under the low canopy of the trees, all of them reluctant to leave the sane and lovely hillside for the black labyrinth of rock and water. The sound of a ship’s siren drifted across the valley, a reminder of the sea, two miles away and yet coiling among the rocks under their feet. It was Olazábal tooting the ERREGUIÑA’s whistle as a signal that he was in position off the coast.

“Stations, gentlemen!” said Echegaray.

They shook hands. Then he, Pablo, and Dick went down the rope ladder and took their places in the boat.

The headlight fizzled, flickered, and burned brightly, throwing a powerful beam which glittered on the smooth, damp walls of the cavern. Dick gave the flywheel a turn, and the motor chugged into life.

“Adios, and a good journey!” called Father Juan.

“Hasta la vuelta—Till we return!” they answered.

The boat slid round a bend in the channel and disappeared. The noise of the motor faded away. Hal sat at the telegraph, watching the cable reel steadily off the drum. Father Juan produced a small black bag from under his cassock.

“What have you got there, padre?” asked Hal.

“The only supplies that Echegaray forgot,” replied Father Juan. “Bandages, antiseptics, a tourniquet, and a few simple surgical instruments. I didn’t like to bring them out before. It might have been a little—er— depressing to the party.”

“It depresses me all right,” said Hal. “They show that you believe in Echegaray’s theory. I’m afraid I’ve been taking it with a grain of salt.”

“You see, you didn’t hear him tell it,” said Father Juan.

The revolving drum slowed and stopped. A minute later Dick’s first message came through:

“Big cleft on our right. Can hear a waterfall somewhere inside. Are keeping straight on. General direction due south.”

Some two hundred yards of cable reeled off the drum. It slackened, stopped, and started again in little jerks.

“The ferret is uncertain which hole to follow,” said Father Juan.

“What are you doing?” tapped Hal.

“Small cave here with many openings,” came the answer from Dick. “We are exploring them all.”

“O.K. How’s everything?” Hal replied.

“Smelly.”

There was silence for quarter of an hour. Then the buzzer purred insistently.

“Lost our way. Don’t know which hole we came in by. Echegaray says reel up wire if you can.”

Hal and Father Juan put their shoulders to the drum and slowly turned it till a hundred yards of wet cable were wound up. It was covered with slime from the bottom, and they got a taste of the atmosphere of decay through which the boat was passing.

“Thanks,” said the telegraph. “You pulled the boat back and showed us how we got in. Trying another hole now.”

The cable whirred off the drum for five minutes, and then stopped. A long message came through from the boat:

“Have arrived at end of tide water. Fish. Mudbank ahead of us. Thousands. Noses against it.”

“What does he say?” asked Father Juan.

“They’ve got to the end of the channel,” answered Hal. “And he’s all excited about some fish. I can’t make much of it.”

“Tell us more,” he tapped.

“Going ashore. Will explain later,” Dick replied. “Don’t expect any messages for little time.”

Hal swore. Then either they were within striking distance of their quarry, or—a thought which made him glance murderously at the two stripped oranges within reach of his hand—the creature was now between them and their line of retreat. He told himself that they could not be in danger once they were off the water, but the fact remained that if they did get caught away from the boat, there would be no means of communication.

Meanwhile Dick and the two men had almost forgotten the object of their expedition in wonder at the extraordinary sight revealed by the sputtering glare of the headlight. The channel was blocked by a steep slope of mud over which were seeping little streams of fresh water. The mud was covered with pieces of jelly which slid slowly and greasily down the bank to the bottom. This jelly was brown in the beam of light, but, outside it, shone with a faint, violet phosphorescence of its own. Where the mud met the water there was a broad ribbon of silver, shivering with greed and excitement. It was formed of the noses and backs of fish, which pressed against the mud nibbling and sucking, rank upon rank of them continually sliding and squirming over each other. The cave was filled with a faint lapping sound caused by the tens of thousands of tiny mouths pecking at the jelly. Sometimes the ranks were broken as dogfish plunged into the shoal and tore at

the shimmering bodies; but never for an instant was there an empty space along the mud-bank. For every square foot of fish that vanished into the swirling, snapping jaws, masses rose from the bottom to press into their places.

"Jellyfish!" exclaimed Pablo. "Jellyfish—I spit in the milk!"

Echegaray lifted a scrap of the jelly on the blade of an oar, and examined it in the glare of the headlight.

"No," he said. "I think they're algæ. But I've never seen such big colonies in the sea. They must be fresh-water algæ."

"What are algæ?" asked Dick.

"Plants. Very primitive plants. There are tons of them to every acre of sea, and they feed the fish just as grass feeds the land animals. But they're so small you can't see them unless they form colonies."

"What do they eat?" Dick asked.

"They don't eat. Water and minerals and light are all they want. I don't know where these get their light, but we'll climb up the bank if we can and see what's on top. Back her down, Dick, and then run her nose hard into the bank."

Dick backed the boat into the darkness, and then charged the bank. It squelched and gave under the bows. The propeller churned up eddies of scum and little fish.

"That'll do," said Echegaray. "Now let's see if the mud will bear,"

Pablo gingerly let himself over the side of the boat. He sank up to his knees in yellow slime, and began floundering up the bank.

"It's soft," he reported, "but there's no suck."

Dick and Don Ramon followed him. They could not pull their feet clear of the thick tidal mud, but shambled forwards a few inches at each step. Their movements stirred up a rich, strong smell that was not unpleasant after the odour of decay that pervaded the dark channel behind. Halfway up the slope the mud became shallower and the going easier. A moment later they were on a fairly level terrace of hard rock. A few inches of water trickled over it, covered by the jelly-like algæ as thick as green scum on a pond.

They saw that they were in a last cave, well above the high-water mark. It was not so wide as some of the underground lakes through which they had passed, but of vast height. A shaft of white light shot down from a rift, like a window high up in the nave of some cathedral, picking out a smooth slope of rock carpeted with the bluish-brown jelly. Evidently this was the parent patch, from which all the floating scum had broken away.

Echegaray took the bearings of the rift, and roughly calculated its angle with the meridian.

"Due south," he said. "We'll see the mid-day sun through that cleft in a minute. It must shine directly through for about a quarter of an hour every day, except for a few months in winter."

The shaft of light was uncanny. The walls and floor of the cave merged into a grey darkness. The entrance was in black night, except where the beam of their headlight glanced off the upper edge of the mud-bank. As they examined the bed of algæ, the sun swung into line with the cleft, and the ray changed from white to gold. It seemed as deliberate as a searchlight, so exactly did it pick out the bed.

Under the direct rays of the sun the patches of jelly quivered and spread. At the sudden movement, the three jumped back, startled. Then they watched the rapid multiplication of the jelly with fascinated eyes. The edges of each patch expanded and broke off, forming islands around the mother patch. Each of these islands expanded and threw off colonies in turn. Some clung to the rock and continued to grow, but most slid down into the water, thickening the scum on its surface.

"Help me, St. Andrew!" exclaimed Pablo. "They'd cover all the ocean in a year!"

"Yes," agreed Echegaray, "if they could breed at this pace anywhere else, and if the fish didn't eat them."

"Are they breeding?" asked Dick, amazed.

"Must be!" answered Don Ramon. "Each of these patches is made of hundreds of thousands of individual cells, and each cell is splitting in two. Then those two split into four, the four into eight, and so on."

"Man! Another legend!" said Pablo sceptically.

"No—fact!" Don Ramon replied. "That's the way they breed. The astonishing thing is that they seem to do it only during the minutes of sunshine, and then very fast. But they have such favourable surroundings. Slimy rock. Water full of minerals and salts. Lord knows what gases. And this blast of sunshine once a day. It's enough to create life itself, let alone make blue algæ get out of control!"

"Are they what the beast eats?" asked Dick.

"I shouldn't think so," said Don Ramon. "The fish eat the algæ, and the beast eats the fish. And so, just because of the accidental meeting of a shaft of light and some chemicals, there's enough food to keep a great carnivorous animal in luxury."

"We'd better get out of this," suggested Pablo. "If your luxurious one should take a fancy to come fishing, he'd make short work of our boat down there."

They splashed back to the edge of the mud-bank through the soupy water. Dick, exploring for an easier way down, discovered that close to the wall of the cave the slope descended in a series of little ledges of mud, like a faintly outlined flight of steps. He sat on the edge and cautiously felt the first step with his feet. It was quite hard under the coating of slime.

"Hola, Pablo! Don Ramon!" he called. "Here's something hard under the mud!"

He scrambled down to the bottom, sploshed along the foot of the bank to the boat, and swivelled the headlight so that the other two could see their way down. Echegaray descended carefully with Pablo a step behind him. On the fifth ledge the Basque stopped for an instant to feel the mud ahead. Pablo came pounding down alongside him.

"Mind!" yelled Echegaray, feeling the support bend under their combined weight.

Pablo floundered desperately. There was a sharp crack. Smoothly and swiftly the two vanished into the mud up to their waists, while Dick howled with laughter.

"Silence, *chico!*" commanded Pablo, gazing at him reproachfully. "Have you no shame?"

Dick had not. He sat on the locker and roared.

"That boy wouldn't lose his sense of humour in the middle of a nightmare," said Echegaray. "I like him."

The wrinkles of his face opened and shut with amusement. He gathered a compact handful of slime, and slung it at Dick with deadly aim. It took him on the side of the head with a satisfying smack.

"If I can throw as well as that later," said Echegaray, wiping his hands, "we'll bag our rabbit!"

"Ugh!" gasped Dick. "It's going down my back. Sorry, Don Ramon! You looked so funny."

"Never mind about that, young man," said Echegaray with a twinkle in his eye. "You get us out of here!"

Dick threw them a coil of rope and started the motor. The boat shot down channel away from the mud-bank. The rope snapped taut. Don Ramon and Pablo came out of the mud with a plop, like a couple of plump corks coming out of a bottle.

Echegaray ruefully rubbed his shoulders, which felt as if they had been nearly dislocated by the jerk. Pablo offered to help him, but Don Ramon waved him hastily away.

"You keep above me or below me, Pablo," he said. My weight is a lot more than it ought to be, and quite enough for whatever we're standing on. By the way, what *are* we standing on?"

He bent down and began to scoop away the mud with his hands. Meanwhile Dick turned the boat around and came back to pick them up.

Don Ramon quickly cleared the little ledge on which he stood. The glare of the headlight showed a strip of hard yellowish-white matter. He cleared the mud from the ledges above and below and found two more strips of the same stuff.

"Mother of Heaven! It's one of our rabbit's ancestors!" exclaimed Don Ramon.

"Go on!" said Pablo with disbelief.

"It is. These are ribs."

"Ribs?"

"Yes," answered Don Ramon. "Ribs. One of the beasts died here canted up against the mud-bank, and the steps are its ribs."

He worked his way to the wall of the cave, and cleared away some more mud. There was the backbone—a line of gaunt, giant vertebrae, from which the ribs curved out and down.

Dick and Pablo were silent. Both of them knew that some monster was sharing with them the dank, underground channel, but they had not realised its size. Dick should not have been surprised, for, from what he had already glimpsed, he could imagine the huge bulk of the beast they hunted. But not the most vivid imagination was equal to the stark fact of those enormous ribs which he had used as a flight of steps.

"This is luck," remarked Don Ramon unperturbed. "Now we can know what our rabbit looks like before we actually see him. I hope he's not so big as his late grandmother."

He struggled up the vertebræ to the top of the mud-bank in the hope of finding the skull, but the long neck burrowed deep into the mud, and there was no way of reaching the far end of it.

“All aboard!” ordered Echegaray. “Let’s go back to that cave where we lost our way—the right hole must be one of those which lead off it. And for the lord’s sake keep your eyes skinned!”

They chugged slowly back along the channel.

Meanwhile Hal and Father Juan had become thoroughly alarmed at the continued silence. They tried to entertain each other, but every attempt at conversation ended in a silence while each stared into the darkness and strained his ears to catch the least sound. Father Juan at last took out his breviary and settled down to compose his thoughts. Hal achieved the same result by setting himself problems in trigonometry.

At length the cable spoke:

Bzzzz—bz—bz—bzzzz.

Hal leant eagerly over the buzzer. That faint sound was all he might ever hear of Dick.

“Are returning to cross-roads,” came the message. “All well. Please reel in.”

Hal and Father Juan wound up the wet cable. No message came through for some minutes. Then the buzzer talked again:

“This looks like it. Low wide passage. Can hardly get boat underneath. Pablo sounding.”

After a short silence Dick reported:

“Thirty feet of water. Rabbit could get in and out though we find it difficult. Have to lie down to get under. Echegaray thinks this connects with first cleft we passed where we heard waterfall. If so we are pretty close to you.”

“What does he say?” asked Father Juan.

“They think they have reached the creature’s hiding place,” answered Hal, “and it sounds as if they might never get out again once they are in.”

The two sat on the edge of the rock, listening eagerly for any sounds of the party’s progress.

Suddenly a great wave came rolling down the passage, and thudded against the foot of the rock. It was followed by another and another until the whole cave was filled with the splash and rumble of water. The cable whizzed madly off the drum.

Hal jumped to the telegraph.

“Heavy wash breaking on rock,” he tapped. “Look out. Something on the move.”

The first three words of Hal’s message were all that got through. At the moment Dick was lying back in the stern with his hand on the tiller. They had dismounted the headlight for it stuck up too high to pass under the roof. Consequently they did not dare to proceed under power. Echegaray and Pablo lay flat in the bows, pushing the boat forwards into the darkness by running their hands along the roof above them. All three had handkerchiefs tied over their noses and mouths, for the stench was nearly unbearable.

“Don Ramon,” whispered Dick, “Hal says there’s a heavy wash breaking. I’ve tried to reply but the line’s dead. I think the cable has broken.”

“Full speed, Ricardito,” said Echegaray. “We don’t want to be caught in here. And keep your head down!”

Dick opened the throttle and the boat shot forwards. Echegaray and Pablo lay on the bottom and prayed. For the moment they were not so concerned with what

had caused the swell as with the swell itself. Any wave more than a foot high would jam the boat against the roof, fill, and sink it.

The swell arrived, caught, and lifted them. They waited in agony for the crash, but it didn't come. The boat shot purring through the darkness, pitching and scattering foam from the bows. By the echo of the motor they could tell that they had passed out into some cavern bigger than any they had seen.

"That will do," ordered Echegaray. "Throw her into reverse, Ricardito, to take the way off! Lord knows what we may hit in a minute."

The propeller churned up the water, and the boat slowly came to a standstill. Then Dick shut off the motor.

"Phew!" whistled Don Ramon. "That's the closest shave I ever had in my life. If Hal hadn't warned us, we should have been smashed to splinters. And now let's get that headlight going, and see where we are."

By the light of a candle he and Pablo rigged the headlamp on its swivel, working with quick fingers and now and again glancing over their shoulders into the threatening darkness. The ferret was without its eyes and defenceless. And evidently the rabbit, as Echegaray euphemistically called it, had discovered that it was being hunted.

At last the white beam shot out across the water. It was greeted by a whirring, hissing roar; the sound that Dick had heard when he kept his watch in the Cave of the Angels. Gathering force, it quivered and pulsated and finally broke into the siren shriek on a note so high that Pablo could not longer hear it. He looked wonderingly at Dick and Echegaray, who had their hands over their ears and were shuddering as the thin sound tore through them. They turned the headlight in the direction of the sound. It died away. There was nothing to be seen but a black, jagged hole, from which ripples and waves were rolling as something within lashed the water.

Turning the beam around and overhead, they saw that they were in a roughly circular cavern, so vast that it seemed like the inside of a hollow mountain. A waterfall plashed down from an unseen height. There were only two entrances; the low one through which they had come, and the other where lurked their quarry.

"That hole must lead straight through to the main channel close to the rock," remarked Echegaray. "I expect the beast stuck his head out, and got tangled up in the cable."

"I'm glad we didn't take that turning when we started out," Dick said.

"Yes. We need plenty of sea room to fight a brute which can make that much noise. And we've got it," said Echegaray, looking round him appreciatively. "We'll wait here and hope that our friend will attack. I feel he's working up his courage."

The old Basque stood in the bows, with one foot on the gunwale and a bomb poised ready in his right hand.

A single big wave left the dark passage, and then the motion of the water died down. Echegaray and Pablo exchanged glances. Neither said a word, for they did not want to alarm Dick; but both suspected that the creature was advancing on them, not storming across the surface as Echegaray assumed it would, but silently and under water.

Pablo turned the headlight in slow circles. It showed nothing but the still, inky water. The only sound was the plashing of the waterfall. The minutes passed.

"*Carajo!*" hissed Pablo. "Look!"

The beam was reflected in three glittering surfaces just below the water. Two of them were undoubtedly eyes, bulbous and glaring. The third, which lay between them, looked somewhat like the pearly eye of a blind man. It had no power of movement and no sort of intelligence in it. It was a small, flat disc, alive with faint and changing shades of mauve, red and green. The three organs silently submerged as the light fell on them.

"Open up the motor, Ricardito," ordered Echegaray. "We'd better keep moving."

They knew that they had changed from the hunters to the hunted. It was not a pleasant thought.

The first sign of the beast's attack was the stench that rose from the water behind them like a solid thing. Pablo swung the beam across the stern. Towering over them was a vast, slimy stomach with two huge flippers outspread like wings. The neck and head were far above the field of the light. The whole bulk was poised in the act of plunging down upon them. With one instantaneous movement Echegaray hurled his bomb and flung himself across Dick's body.

The darkness split open with a flash and a shattering explosion that filled the air with flying flesh and metal. Dick felt Echegaray's protecting body jump and palpitate, and a stream of warm blood trickled over his head. The stern was lifted high in the air and the boat shot sickeningly down a slope of water. He heard the motor roar open, as Pablo jumped for the tiller and backed against the wall of the cavern. It stopped. He was relieved of smothering weight, and knew that Pablo had disentangled himself from the heap and was lifting Echegaray's body off him. Dick struggled to his feet, coughing and choking in the acrid fumes of the explosion. He saw that the Basque's arm and shoulder had been shattered by a fragment of the bomb. Pablo's clothes were hanging in ribbons; his skin was burnt and bleeding from several flesh wounds.

"Get forward, Ricardito," Pablo whispered, "and keep the light circling. Try a long distance shot if you see the thing again. I must patch up Don Ramon."

Dick obeyed instantly. Then he asked:

"What happened?"

"I spit in the milk! The brute was so close that the bomb meant almost certain death for us. Thank God you're not hurt, boy!"

"And Don Ramon?" asked Dick with a catch in his voice.

"He'll pull through," murmured Echegaray shakily, "if you can close that artery, Pablo. Don't look back, Ricardito! Our lives depend on your eyes. That devil isn't dead yet."

Pablo cut away what was left of Don Ramon's jersey, and twisted a cord tightly around his arm above the severed artery. Then he bound up arm and shoulder with the long red sash from his waist. Meanwhile Dick swung the light in a semicircle, peering steadily along the beam.

The beast did not leave them long in doubt. Its head, supported by a long, serpentine neck, rose twenty feet above the water and moved towards the boat. The head was not unlike that of an alligator, but broader and deeper. It was very small in comparison to the enormous barrel-shaped body. In the middle of the forehead was the motionless disc of jelly. Dick pulled the wire of a bomb, and, aiming at that unnatural organ, tossed it in a long, slow curve.

It fell short, but in the blast of yellow light Dick saw the creature's head jerk back. Then a column of white water reared up, and hung for an instant like a broad, shady tree of foam. The beam of the headlight waved in dizzy circles as the boat pitched and rocked on the swell. Now and again it fell on the great neck coiling and recoiling. The neck was no longer smooth and slimy. The explosion had ripped off rows of the heavy scales. They hung like broken leaves, dripping blood.

Dick did not give the beast time to recover. It was impossible to throw straight, almost impossible to stand, for the waves reverberated from every direction. The wash from the two explosions was still leaping back and forth between the walls of the cavern. Rocks loosened by the blast slithered and plunged into the water, setting up new turmoil. The boat heaved as madly as a toy boat in a swimming pool when a score of men are diving into the tank around it. Choosing his moment when a charging slope of water flung the boat upwards, Dick let fly a second bomb. A cross wave spoilt his direction and nearly threw him overboard, but again the bomb fell close to the target, and the horrible head was enveloped in flame and water.

This time the beast had had enough. Great shreds and festoons of torn flesh hung from its chest. Dropping its head on the surface, it bolted into the black tunnel out of which it had come. They caught a glimpse of its full length—twenty feet of neck, fifty feet of barrel-shaped body, and a tail that might have been fifteen or twenty feet more.

"After him!" murmured Echegaray. "After him!"

Dick returned to his post at the motor, and cut away the useless telegraph cable. Pablo worked his way to the bows, and stood crouching over the locker like a massive figurehead, with his stocky legs firmly jammed against the ribs of the boat. They plunged across the cave through the jumping water, and shot into the black hole beyond. Pablo stared along the beam of the light, snapping out rapid changes of course.

"Hard a port!" came the final order.

Dick put the helm over. They skidded round a corner, and out into the main channel. There was the giant reptile a little ahead of them, churning through the water towards the rock. Hal and Father Juan saw the savage head driving down channel like a torpedo. They were ready, for they had heard the screams of the beast and the distant roar of the explosions. Hal grasped a bomb, but before he could throw it the boat flashed into sight hard on the beast's tail, and he heard Pablo's warning shout. Slamming the water with outspread flippers, the beast made a leap for the rock. At the same moment Pablo planted a bomb close under its tail. The reptile seemed to hang for an instant on a pillar of fire and foam. Its tail lashed in and out of the darkness. Its body seemed vast and formless in the writhing fumes of the explosion. Then it flopped on to the rock, and struck at the two men with a vicious sidelong lunge of its neck. Accustomed to darkness, it miscalculated the distance in the dim light. The head struck Hal and Father Juan like a battering ram, but the mouth was not open to seize them. They were shot head over heels into the hollow where Dick had once spent the night. The reptile slithered over the rock and dropped with a thunderous plunge into the channel that led to the open sea.

Dick raced up the rope ladder, and jumped into the hollow where Hal and Father Juan lay in a tangled heap. They were both breathing, but knocked unconscious. He propped them up and loosened their clothing. In a few seconds Hal opened his eyes.

"Thank the Lord you're all right, kid," he said.

"And you, Hal? Where does it hurt you?"

"Sore all over, but I don't think any damage is done," answered Hal, making an effort to sit up.

He felt his chest and sides carefully.

"Ouch! There's a rib broken! But that's nothing— how's the padre?"

"All right," answered Father Juan feebly. "A cut on the forehead and all the wind knocked out of me, but plenty of fight left… Heavens, Ricardito!"

Dick looked more badly hurt than any of them. He had nothing solid on him but his belt, from which shirt and shorts hung in shreds. His skin was black and caked with blood, his own, Echegaray's, and the beast's. But as a matter of fact he had suffered nothing worse than a varied assortment of cuts and bruises.

"Don't worry about me, padre," he said. "I'm a bit dirty—that's all. Let's see to Don Ramon. His arm's half off."

The three scrambled back on to the rock. Father Juan tucked up his cassock, and painfully let himself down the ladder.

"Hola, the padre!" said Pablo with a pretence of cheeriness. "Can you help me get him up?"

Father Juan looked at him keenly.

"You're hurt, too, Pablo," he said.

"Never mind me! Help me with Don Ramon! Quick!"

Pablo lashed Echegaray to a plank. Then the other three hoisted him on to the rock by the derrick. He was pale as death and unconscious. They carried him out to the daylight, and laid him in the ox-cart with a pile of hay under his body. The oxen grazed undisturbed. The sun shot down through the oak leaves, pencilling warm shadow patterns on the turf. To Dick the sunlit valley seemed utterly unreal, compared to the horrible struggle that had been fought out under its surface. He felt that weeks had passed since he last saw it, and that it had no business to remain so peaceful and unchanged.

Father Juan leaned over Echegaray, fixing the tourniquet above the severed artery, and changing the red sash for a clean linen bandage.

"You did a good job, Pablo," he said.

There was no answer. He looked round. Pablo had not yet come up from the boat. Hal and Dick, instantly alarmed, dashed back into the cavern. Pablo lay crumpled up on top of the rock. The last of his strength had been used to drag himself up the rope ladder.

"He never said he was hurt!" cried Dick desperately, as if he could have helped Pablo had he only known.

"Help me to get him on my back," said Hal. "I can't lift but I can bear a weight all right."

He carried Pablo out of the cave and laid him by the side of Echegaray. As he did so, blood poured from one of the fisherman's heavy sea-boots. There was a ragged hole in his calf, from which a sliver of steel protruded. Father Juan

extracted it, and disinfected the wound. The pain shook Pablo out of his faint. He tried to get up, accompanying his struggles with a blast of oaths.

"Lie still, great brute," ordered Father Juan jovially, "and cease to blaspheme the saints who have saved your worthless carcase! How long ago did this happen?"

"Same bomb that got Don Ramon," answered Pablo. "There was a lot of it, *caramba!*"

Echegaray stirred feebly on his bed of hay.

"Ricardito…" he murmured.

"All's well, old friend," said Father Juan, holding some water to his lips.

"No. No. Not well… Ricardito… I swore that no harm should come to him."

"He's all right," replied Father Juan gently. "Look at him."

Echegaray raised his head.

"You're bleeding, Ricardito!"

"Not much," said Dick. "Most of it isn't mine."

"Whose is it, then?"

Dick didn't answer. He looked at Father Juan for instructions.

"Is it mine?" asked Echegaray.

"Yes," said Dick unhappily.

"Mine," murmured Echegaray. "Mine… We've mingled our blood, Ricardito. I thought you might do. And fate—fate is quite sure you'll do. I accept you."

He lapsed into the Basque tongue.

"He's light-headed," whispered Father Juan.

"I'm nothing of the sort," said Don Ramon in a surprisingly firm voice. "Nothing of the sort! Have any of you thought of warning Olazábal that the beast's loose?"

They had not. They had all forgotten the little ERREGUIÑA cruising off the coast.

"Who can go?"

"I'll go," said Dick. The padre and I are the only ones who can run, and the padre's wanted here."

"Good boy!" whispered Don Ramon, exhausted by his burst of energy. "It's up to you. You and Olazábal, you'll be in at the death."

Chapter 7

DICK trotted down through the trees into the open, and then lengthened his stride. At first every step cost him a twinge of pain, but as the muscles of his body settled down to a steady run, he was only conscious of the rush of warm air past his face, and the brushing of the grass against his shins. Though he did not know it, he had caught the spirit of the born fighter—the spirit that takes discomfort and the possible loss of comrades as a matter of course, and only looks forward to the objective to be won. Swerving around the clumps of bushes, and vaulting the low walls in his course, he crossed the little plain and began pounding up the slope that overlooked the sea. Where the blue of the horizon faded into haze hung the smoke of a liner, passing carelessly along the well-travelled sea lane from

Coruña to Bilbao. Probably there was not a man aboard her to whom the distant coast was anything more than a strip of white on a chart.

Off the Cave of the Angels rocked the ERREGUIÑA. Dick could see that her crew were alert and excited. On the bridge Olazábal was steadily searching the coast with his glasses. There were look-outs in the bows and in the stern. She had a full head of steam up.

Olazábal spotted Dick the moment his head rose above the sky-line.

"Hola! *Que pasa?*" he yelled, his great voice carrying the third of a mile which separated them as clearly as if he had been at Dick's side.

Dick waved to him to stand in. The ERREGUIÑA turned and began foaming towards the shore.

"What's up?" repeated Olazábal, as soon as they were close enough for Dick's voice to carry.

"Watch out for yourselves!" called Dick. "It's got away!"

"We're watching," came the answer. "Anyone hurt?"

"Yes," Dick shouted. "Take me aboard if you can."

ERREGUIÑA'S dinghy splashed into the water, and Olazábal was rowed in shore by one of his crew. Dick clambered down to the sea to meet them. He jumped as the boat rose on a swell, and tumbled safely into the bottom.

"How high did you go?" asked Olazábal, observing Dick's blackened body.

He hid his concern under an air of mischievous amusement, in the way of men who live among risks and cannot afford to take any disaster too seriously.

"High?" asked Dick, puzzled.

"When you blew yourselves up."

"We didn't go up," Dick explained. "We had to bomb the brute when he was right on us. Echegaray and Pablo were hit by the bits."

"How badly hurt?"

"I don't know," said Dick, shaking his head.

"*Por Dios!* As bad as that!" Olazábal exclaimed. "We'll finish that murderous brute, Ricardito!"

"Echegaray said it was up to us," replied Dick simply. "Have you seen the thing?"

"No," said Olazábal, "but it's out."

He pointed to a faint brown stain on the water.

"That was a patch of blood," he said. "It was red ten minutes ago. I'm glad it's the beast's blood—I thought perhaps it was taking one of you for a journey out to sea."

"Which way did it go?" asked Dick.

"We couldn't tell. All we saw was that blood oozing up to the surface. We'll pick up the trail if we can. Tell me the whole story as we go."

The dinghy scraped against the side of the ERREGUIÑA. Olazábal hoisted Dick on board and pulled himself up after. The crew swung the boat into its cradle on the half-deck, and stood by for orders. They had considered up to this moment that their captain was indulging a whim to go hunting some large and doubtful game of the sea. That much Olazábal had told them. But now, with the battered Dick before their eyes and the news that Echegaray and Pablo had become serious

casualties, they saw that their quest was really dangerous, and began to take an interest in it.

"East or west?" asked Olazábal. "Any opinion, Ricardito? Or shall we toss for it?"

"Let's go west," said Dick.

"Why?"

"Well, we might look around Offering Key. Echegaray said that once upon a time the beasts went ashore there."

"This one," objected Olazábal, "has never seen Offering Key. Its great-grandfather wasn't born when the people sacrificed there—if they ever did."

"Still, it might go there," Dick insisted, "just as birds and fishes find out for themselves the same places that suited their ancestors—though they can't have heard anything about them."

"He has a head on him, this youngster!" exclaimed Olazábal, and spat over the side as if to call the waves' attention to it.

He put the helm down. The ERREGUINA's bows rose and dipped through a quarter circle till they pointed towards Offering Key and the mouth of the Villadonga river.

"Full speed ahead!" ordered Olazábal. "Port and starboard watches, look out for blood on the water! I'll give five dollars to the man who reports it first."

Dick stood by Olazábal on the bridge and told him rapidly the bare outline of their adventures. The captain accepted without question his account of the size and shape of the creature they hunted, but his imagination boggled at the blue algae and the shoals of fish which fed on them.

"But, *chico!*" he roared in protest. "If that's true I'll plant them on the mud-banks of Zumaya harbour and never go to sea again!"

"I suppose you could," said Dick. "But you'd have to plant them in their own mud, and see that the sun only strikes them once a day."

"Man! I'll give them each an umbrella!" said Olazábal.

"Blood on the starboard bow!" yelled a hoarse voice.

Olazábal snapped the glasses to his eyes. A patch of scum, crimson and cream, was heaving up and down on the swell quarter of a mile ahead.

"Half speed!" he ordered.

Then he placed the three naked bombs on a locker within easy reach of his right hand.

"Pedro—to you the five dollars!" he said to the seaman who had spotted the patch of blood. "And now watch with better eyes than ever, or you won't live to drink them up."

He turned to Dick.

"Ricardito," he said, "we must be right on his tail. That blood is fresh."

Fifty fathoms ahead of them, a wave broke for no apparent reason. The dull green of the water showed that some large bulk was lurking just beneath the surface.

"Full speed!" roared Olazábal.

He changed course. ERREGUIÑA darted for the shadow, and deliberately rammed it. Her blunt, purposeful bows crashed down into the hollow of a sea, while the men aboard her, each clinging to whatever was nearest his hand, braced

themselves to meet the shock. But the boat plunged smoothly forwards. Whatever had been in its path had silently submerged before the onrush.

Olazábal reduced speed and cruised to and fro, waiting. Three times they saw the darkness under the water, but no sooner had they changed course than it vanished, leaving only an ooze of blood on the surface. Suddenly ten feet of tail lashed out of the sea ahead of them. The black scales shone like mirrors in the sun. Olazábal and his crew gasped with astonishment. The power in that sleek, thick tail gave them a pretty clear idea of the size of the creature that owned it. Again ERREGUIÑA butted into the swell a little ahead of where the tail had been, but hit nothing.

"Pretty play!" exclaimed Olazábal coolly, borrowing a metaphor from the bull ring.

He meant that their enemy was baiting them as a skilful matador plays the charging bull.

"Yes," said Dick. "But we're a bull of fierce breed."

"Fierce," remarked Olazábal, jamming the helm up so suddenly that ERREGUIÑA heeled over at an angle of forty-five degrees, "is right!"

They rushed a shadow, and felt a shudder run through the boat as the keel lightly touched some obstruction.

"If he starts playing to the gallery like that," said Olazábal, "he's going straight to hospital!"

They hovered cruising around the floating islands of blood, but saw no more movement in the water. Then slowly and warily they resumed their course towards Offering Key. Evidently the reptile had decided that it would take no more chances with this clumsy but fearless enemy. They had to trust to luck again, and hope that the brute had not turned back on his traces.

Offering Key squatted low on the water a mile and a half away to the west; a grey, flat rock, melancholy and dangerous in time of storm, but delicious on a calm autumn day, when the sun struck sparkles of gold from the stone, and the cool water invited the bather to glide in and out of it like a diving bird. There was a patch of orange in the centre of the rock. Olazábal, thinking it might be more blood, raised his glasses to his eyes. He dropped them almost instantly, and looked at Dick. The knuckles of his great hands turned white as he nervously tightened his grip on the wheel. In his grey eyes Dick saw fear for the first and only time.

"What?" Dick asked.

"La condesita," answered the captain. "That's her in an orange swimming suit. She's been bathing off the Key."

He turned to speak to the engineer hidden behind the boiler. His voice was cold and steady, quite unlike the hearty roar with which he usually passed the orders to his one-man engine room.

"Friend," he said, "give her everything you've got! Get us alongside Offering Key within five minutes!"

"I'll shake the engine loose if I do," answered the engineer.

"Shake it loose!" said Olazábal.

The engineer never argued with Olazábal. His only reply was a brief turn of the wrist; it sent the ERREGUIÑA racketing through the water. The sweet thudding of

the engines gave way to a mad vibration, as every loose rivet and washer danced to the tune of the racing pistons. Dick and Olazábal stared at the Key as if their straining eyes could bring it closer. They were not watching Lola nor the rock, but the water that lapped against its low, sheer sides. The captain tooted his siren to attract Lola's attention, and she stood up and waved in reply. Like the rest of the village, she thought that they were still engaged in charting the depths of the underground channel, and had no idea that they had discovered its secret.

"*Recristo!*" swore Olazábal. "Look, Ricardito!"

They had picked up the trail again, now when they least wanted to see it. The ERREGUIÑA was running past one of the familiar patches of blood.

Two minutes passed. They were still not quite half-way to Offering Key. The third minute was an eternity. Dick and Olazábal stood side by side with set faces. A plate started from its bed in the engine pit, and added its infernal rattle to the din. Dick suddenly realised that he was gripping a bomb. Unconsciously he had picked one up the moment he saw Lola in danger. He had grown rapidly accustomed to the use of those steel balls.

There was still a minute and a half to go before they could ease up alongside the Key and take Lola aboard. Then at the edge of the shore, just afloat, appeared a dark object. Every man on the ERREGUIÑA tried desperately to believe that it was an orange box or a lump of seaweed. It swung up a little higher on a wave, and the sun glinted on two eyes and the dull surface between. The head rose wearily out of the sea. It seemed horrible that the long neck should straighten so slowly while the ERREGUIÑA shuddered with speed. There was a flurry in the water as the beast swung its tail to gain momentum. The paddles smacked on to the flat Key, and it flopped ashore—fifty feet of torn, scaly bulk flopping over the hard rock. They could hear it above the racket of the engines.

Lola stood. A slim, orange-clad figure, her black hair floating on her shoulders, she stood and watched. When the head first came hovering over the edge of the rock, she all but fainted; she would have done so, had she not realised in the same instant that this was why the ERREGUIÑA was tearing towards her, and that the men on board all knew of her danger. She did not think of running. She had never run away from anything that was solid and could be seen, for she and her ancestors were as much a part of this land as the trees that grew on it; they feared nothing it could produce. Staring straight in front of her, she watched the giant body bounce on to the rock and bounce again. The flippers smashed down on either side of her, heaving forward a blank wall of scales and muscle, which pumped back and forth with the beating of the heart; she did not see the flat head which hovered over her, as if hesitating whether it was worth while to strike at this lonely, bright object.

The blood from the torn neck splashed at her feet. It was this that made her look up. In the savage, meaningless stare, she thought she recognised pain. Lola hated pain, and even in her terror felt pity for the mangled beast. The eyes of the girl and the reptile held each other for a second. The creature did not understand pity; there was no room in its tiny brain for that. But there was room for the one thought that all animals may think—*is this dangerous?* Whatever waves of intelligence can pass between two living things told it that the unknown object was not dangerous. Lola's pity was not wholly lost. The great reptile rejected the

offering that fate had put in its way. Stretching out its head on the rock, and whipping the last yards of its tail out of the water, it curled up in the sun, neck and tail forming a circle. Within the hollow of its shoulder Lola stood motionless.

When the thing came out of the water, the men and the boy on the ERREGUIÑA cried out in horror as if they had had a single voice between them. Then Olazábal pulled himself together.

"Stop the engines!" he ordered. "Keep still, all of you!"

ERREGUIÑA drifted up to Offering Key, gradually losing way. There was not a sound on board her that might startle the beast.

"She's not afraid," whispered Olazábal through his teeth. "The little splendid one! *Caray!* Do even the sea beasts recognise the best blood in Spain?"

"She—she's talking to it," said Dick.

As a matter of fact Lola had not opened her mouth, but Dick felt the strange and subtle communication between her and the beast.

The boat slid alongside. Lola saw Olazábal motion to her to be still, putting his finger on his lips. She had no intention of moving. She had not moved a step since the thing rose from the sea.

The crew stood still—wooden men on a silent ship. Their dark eyes glanced up at Olazábal expectantly. They knew he had bombs within reach of his hand, and for the moment could not see why he did not use them. But the captain from his point of vantage on the bridge could see the utter hopelessness of Lola's situation. He dared not throw; the risk that the blast would annihilate Lola was too great. And even if he could so place a bomb that the whole thickness of the barrel-shaped body was between her and the explosion, it might not instantly be fatal, and in the death struggles of the reptile the little orange figure would be swept up and crushed.

ERREGUIÑA, now without steerage way, rolled gently in the calm water. Her side crunched against the sheer edge of Offering Key, and at the sound the muscles stirred along the flank of the beast, and its tail started to lash ponderously from side to side. Then the appalling scream began; the soundless vibration which gathered force until at last it came to the ears as a shattering siren shriek. The crew of the ERREGUIÑA, who had never heard the call of the great lizard before, put their hands over their ears and prayed to all their saints to stop it. But on Dick it acted like a battle cry, breaking the spell of blank horror which held him.

Before Olazábal could prevent him, he jumped on to the rail and sprang like a cat across the strip of water. He landed with his toes on the edge of the rock, took two headlong steps, and hurdled the prostrate neck to land at Lola's side. He grabbed her round the waist and heaved with a strength far beyond his years. She was swung clear over the neck and let go with a shove that sent her stumbling into the sea. At the same instant the beast, now thoroughly aroused, heaved its whole weight upwards. Dick, utterly spent by his supreme effort and still lying across the neck, was tossed into the air. He came down on the smooth, slippery back, clawing desperately for a handhold. He found one—a red, gaping hole with a segment of steel inside it—and checked his fall just enough to make certain that it would end in the sea, not underneath the furious tail. He plunged in a fathom in

front of the Erreguiña, which was slowly backing away from the rock. Lola was treading water a few yards away from him.

Olazábal's first act when he saw Lola fall clear was to start his engines and get steerage way on the ERREGUIÑA lest the girl should be crushed between the rock and the side of the boat. He worked his ship away, stern foremost, with delicate seamanship, concentrating on his task as if there were no scream in his ears and no huge shadow across his deck. By the time that Dick too hit the friendly sea, the ERREGUIÑA was her own length from the Key and manageable.

Then Olazábal looked up. The reptile was poised high on its flippers. It had chosen the ERREGUIÑA as its enemy, and paid no attention to the two small bodies swimming fast around the bows to safety. Its head darted back and forth like a piston. The pulp between its eyes glistened and flashed in the sun. Olazábal swiftly glanced at Dick and Lola, and saw that in another instant they would be under cover of the ship's side. He pulled the wire of a bomb. The crew dropped flat behind the bulwarks.

"From the SAN JOSÉ—take it!" he roared.

There was no curve to the path of that bomb. From the moment it left Olazábal's hand there was never a doubt where it was aimed nor where it would strike. It spun across the water straight, hard, and low, and smashed into the jelly on the reptile's forehead. The world roared wide open. Unmoved by the rain of living tissue, metal, and bone which drove past him, Olazábal stood with his arm still outstretched, peering through the fumes to see what was left of his target. He alone saw the end. There was no longer a head; only tassels of flesh hanging from the giant neck. The beast plunged sullenly forwards into the water. He saw its shadow pass under the ERREGUIÑA, and wriggle away. Like a worm whose head has been cut off, the hulk of the reptile still lived. Its brain was very small and unimportant compared to the great nerve centres along the spine. Those nerve centres could still order the headless beast to move its flippers and to swim into deep water, where death would slowly overtake them, one after another, in the darkness.

As soon as the crew had hauled Lola and Dick out of the water, the boy felt himself overwhelmed by weariness. The enthusiastic voices around him blurred into a murmur of which he understood nothing. The strong, gentle hands that supported him seemed to belong to thousands of men instead of a few. Then the tall figure of Olazábal loomed up before his eyes. So real and solid was it that he was swept back into full consciousness.

"How's Lola?" he asked.

"Lying down in my cabin," said Olazábal. "She's not hurt. You come along too!"

"I will," Dick answered. "But wait a minute. I've got to be sick."

He tottered away from the captain, and sick he was as many a hero has been before him. Several of the crew followed him, anxious to be of assistance.

"Leave him alone," said Olazábal. "He must have it out by himself. I remember once falling down the chute of a canning factory, and I'd have come out as a dozen boxes of sardines, complete with label and tin-opener, if Captain Allarte hadn't dived in after me and pulled me clear. He wasn't hurt—nor was I—but he made straight for the nearest corner and was as ill as Ricardito there. And when I tried

to help him, he stopped just long enough to tell me to mind my own misbegotten business!"

The captain waited until the exhausted Dick had finished, and then picked him up in his arms and carried him to the after cabin. By the time he had got there, Dick was fast asleep.

"Very good!" said Olazábal approvingly. "That boy is just naturally made for danger. First he gets the shock out of his system, and then he sleeps off the bad effects. No more nerves than a wild-cat!"

He swung himself up to the bridge, and piloted the ERREGUIÑA around the Key and into the Villadonga river. The fields on both banks were deserted. In the long shadows of the trees the cows lay chewing the cud, their heads turned away from the setting sun. A fishing boat was dropping down the second reach of the river on the tide. Its idle sail showed white across the meadows. As the ERREGUIÑA rippled round the bend, the occupants of the boat stood up and waved excitedly. One of them was Paca, and the other the local innkeeper.

"What happened?" shouted the innkeeper.

"Nothing, man! Nothing!" answered Olazabal.

"I heard you playing hymns on that siren of yours," said the innkeeper, "and then your boiler blew up!"

"It's still here," the captain replied. "Come aboard and see!"

He threw them a line and took the boat in tow. Paca, who up to that moment had not said a word, hauled herself up the ERREGUIÑA'S side with surprising agility.

"Where's Ricardito?" she asked passionately.

"Down below, woman," said Olazábal. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong, he asks! Standing there with a face as pale as a new born babe's! What's wrong indeed—with shrieks and explosions enough to fetch King Felipe Segundo out of his grave!"

"Well," said the captain, "you two seem to be the only ones who heard anything."

"*Ca!* We're the only ones who were anxious," answered Paca.

"Aye—you've guessed enough to be listening. But how about that fat wineskin there? What makes him think of us as soon as he hears a bang?"

"Man! It's that you owe me a lot of money!" said the innkeeper.

Olazábal roared with laughter.

"Ho!" he said. "Love and money! Love and money! Nothing like them for sharpening the ears!"

"Stop your foolishness!" blazed Paca. "Tell me what happened!"

Olazábal told her enough to send her flying to Lola's side. Paca was a splendid comforter. When she entered the cabin, it seemed to Lola that all the simple, hearty life of Villadonga—the earth, the firesides, the nets, and the farms—had burst in with her. Horror could not endure among such familiar things.

They tied up to the quay amid little curiosity. But as soon as Olazábal carried Dick ashore, still sleeping and in his blood-stained rags, the cottages gave up their inhabitants and the quayside hummed with questions.

"Patience!" ordered Olazábal. "It's a long story and you'll hear it many times."

He hooked the postmaster out of the crowd with his spare arm.

"You," he said, "wire to Llanes for a doctor! Tell him to come prepared for a compound fracture of the arm with all possible complications. And we'll want him to stay here a few days."

"Who's hurt?" asked Lola and Paca simultaneously.

"Don Ramon and Pablo. Will you make up beds for them, Paca? Get some of the women to help you."

"They must come to our house," declared Lola. "Then mother and I can nurse them."

"You'll want nursing yourself, my dear," Olazábal replied.

"No, I won't. Not if I've got them to look after," said Lola positively.

She ran up the street to her mother's house, the blanket in which she was draped floating out behind her, and her swimming suit glittering like gold tissue in the last rays of the sun.

Meanwhile the oxen were slowly plodding home with their freight. Father Juan strolled ahead of them in the manner born, hooting and brandishing a stick. Hal sat in the hay between Echegaray, who was delirious and muttering to himself in Basque, and Pablo, protecting them from the worst of the jolts. At intervals Pablo and Hal would curse the slow pace of the oxen, and try to reconstruct from the beast's scream and the explosion what had been happening off the coast. Father Juan had gone up to the top of the cliffs to report, but by the time he got there the ERREGUIÑA had rounded Offering Key and was out of sight. For all they knew, she might have gone to the bottom.

At last they came within sight of the river. There was the ERREGUIÑA at her berth, and groups of blue-shirted men eddying and shifting over the quayside. They saw Olazábal with Dick in his arms, and for one terrible moment Hal thought his brother was dead. But the stirrings of the crowd dispelled his fears. They were not the slow and reverent movements with which men acknowledge the presence of death, but rapid and excited.

As soon as Olazábal saw them approaching the bridge, he put them out of doubt in four words.

"Beast dead! All safe!" he roared.

The blast of his voice, pitched to carry half a mile, woke Dick up with a start. He slid to his feet and looked wonderingly over the village, the ERREGUIÑA, and the cart lumbering across the bridge.

"Gosh!" he said. "We're all here!"

The doctor from Llanes arrived in an hour, and ran his patients over on an improvised operating table that resembled a front-line casualty clearing station by the time he had finished. After an examination of Echegaray he sent at once for a specialist from Bilbao, who appeared two days later. Within a week Hal was back on his job, the broken rib rapidly knitting under its straps, and Dick and Pablo were limping about the village, enjoying a justifiable amount of hero-worship; but Don Ramon was still fighting for life.

Everyone in the village visited the house of Ribadasella at least once a day, and stood outside whispering and tip-toeing, sniffing the waves of chloroform and antiseptics that mingled with the scents of the garden. Sometimes Doña Mariquita or Lola would come out for a breath of air, and answer questions in a low voice. Sometimes the doctors could be seen washing their hands, or talking together with

serious faces. Almost every hour the postmaster delivered telegrams asking for news—many of them from Olazábal, who had been compelled to return to Zumaya.

The doctors had told Echegaray that he must lose his arm—that any attempt to save it would be terribly dangerous. But the Basque would not be frightened, and ordered them to take the risk. They cut and set, drained and grafted until there was nothing left of Echegaray but the breath in his nostrils and a wasted body that barely curved the sheets of his bed. Twice the doctors gave up hope, and Father Juan held himself in readiness to administer the last rites. But Echegaray refused to die. In his lucid intervals he said as much. And so since he would not die he had to get well.

There was wild rejoicing in the village when it was known that Don Ramon was definitely round the corner and calling for food. They came with their gifts as if it had been the christening of a Count of Ribadasella. Milk, eggs, joints of lamb, jars of wine, fruit, and flowers were deposited at Doña Mariquita's doorstep by shy men and talkative women, none of whom would take a penny for their produce.

Echegaray was very touched by their devotion.

"You'd think by the way they treat me that I was the father of the whole village," he said to Dick on the first day that he was allowed conversation.

"Well," Dick replied. "You see they're awfully proud to have you here—and then they all love you."

"I don't see why they should. I haven't done anything for them."

"But people do love you," said Dick shyly.

"Are you one of people?" asked Echegaray.

"Me? I'm just all the people together!" Dick answered.

"That's good," said Don Ramon. "Because, Ricardito, I want you to be my heir."

"To the shipyard?" asked Dick.

"To that—and to a lot of less material things which I think you'll find quite as interesting. It will mean spending most of your life in Spain, Ricardito, and a lot of hard work."

"I don't mind," said Dick. "And perhaps we could start a branch in England some time."

Echegaray laughed.

"I'll send you to Southampton to learn some of their tricks of yacht building," he said. "But that's beside the point. I'm glad you're willing, Ricardito, for I've set my heart on having you. I thought you might do, and took you with me in the boat to see how you'd behave in an emergency. You must forgive me for making you go through all those horrors. I didn't think it would be such a test as it was."

"Forgive you?" exclaimed Dick. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

"Well," said Echegaray, "I'll see if I can get your brother's consent, and then we'll celebrate. Send a wire to Olazábal and tell him that he and his bunch of pirates are invited to dinner two weeks from to-day."

"Two weeks from to-day!" Dick protested. "You won't be up."

"I will!" said Echegaray, "and walking, too!"

Don Ramon kept his word. In two weeks he was just able to totter down to the quayside to greet the ERREGUIÑA when she steamed up river with siren tooting and a string of flags flying, most of which had undoubtedly been cut from the tails of Olazábal's more colourful shirts.

The dinner was served in Hal's house, for it had been agreed that Paca must cook it, and Paca refused to work outside her own kitchen on so great an occasion. Don Ramon, for once wearing a tie, Doña Mariquita, and Hal sat at one end of the massive table; Dick, Lola, and Olazábal at the other. Pablo and the crew of the ERREGUIÑA occupied the middle, with Father Juan amongst them to act as a restraining influence in case their flights of fancy became too profane. The postmaster, the innkeeper, and the Llanes doctor were there—the latter in a festive mood, for Echegaray had sworn that he knew just as much as the specialist, and had insisted on paying him the same fee. An empty place stood ready for Paca to slip into, as soon as she had passed the last course into the hands of her helpers.

When the main business of eating was over, and the champing of powerful jaws had given way to a roar of noise and laughter, Echegaray stood up.

"Condesa de Ribadasella," he said, "Doña Mariquita, and gentlemen! I dedicate this cup to the bravest act I ever heard of! And I've heard of some remarkable ones! To Ricardito's rescue of—shall I say?—his lady in distress!"

They drank. The room shook with the wild cheers of Olazábal's crew. There was no holding them. They looked prepared to go on expressing their admiration of Dick till midnight. Indeed, they would have done so, had they not become suddenly abashed by the presence of Doña Mariquita, and sat down instantly and in a body.

The unexpected collapse of the crew left Pablo still on his feet. He had been shouting a toast of his own, under cover of the general noise, and now found himself announcing in a dead silence:

"May he marry Lola, and be the Count of Ribadasella!"

Dick blushed purple. Pablo dropped into his seat and pretended he had lost his napkin under the table; it was, as a matter of fact, firmly tucked into his collar. Lola calmly grabbed Olazábal's glass, and drank the toast.

"I hope he does, Pablo," she said. "I'll have him!"

"Lola!" exclaimed her scandalised mother—but the next moment broke into a ripple of laughter, for she had caught Father Juan looking at the children with a holy and satisfied expression as if they were already before him at the altar.

"Time enough for that, young woman!" said Echegaray. "And if you're both of the same mind ten years from now, I dare say there won't be so much difficulty as you think. My friends, Don Enrico, at my earnest request, has permitted me to take charge of Ricardito's education and future. It won't be a legal adoption, for I know that Ricardito doesn't want to change his nationality, and I don't expect him to. But he will be free to use my name as well as his own, and he will succeed me in everything. In everything," he repeated, looking straight at Paca.

"I don't know," began Father Juan, "that I altogether approve of this."

"You will, padre, you will!" said Echegaray. "I'll give him an education such as no boy ever had! You suspect me, padre, of possessing certain unusual powers. For the sake of argument, let's admit I have them. But they are merely simple rules of thumb for getting results that are puzzling. I can't tell you why they get results, nor could my ancestors. But perhaps, some day, my new son will be able to tell you why, for besides those rules of thumb he's going to learn all the biology and physics that the best universities can teach him."

“He’d be rather an alarming person to have in the family, Don Ramon,” said Doña Mariquita, smiling. “Will he have webbed feet and a laboratory too?”

“And let me ride on his porpoise?” added Pablo.

“And build me another ERREGUIÑA, when this one is broken up?” asked Olazábal.

“He’ll do anything you like,” said Hal, answering Dick’s appealing glance, “if you’ll only talk about somebody else.”

“All right,” said Father Juan, “we will! I can see that you’re all going to make speeches about Don Ramon—that is, those of you who can stand up—”

“I can stand up,” interrupted Pablo, and did so.

“Well, sit down,” said Father Juan. “But before you begin your speeches, I propose the health of the happiest person here, the one to whom we are all most grateful at the moment—Paca!”

“*Ay, mi madre!*” exclaimed Paca, and would have fled to her kitchen, had not Dick jumped up, reined her in by her apron strings, and deposited two resounding kisses on her scarlet cheeks.

“A dance! A dance!” roared Olazábal.

He seized a guitar, put one foot on the table, and crashed into the mad melody of an ancient Basque war-song, while the seamen stamped back and forth in two swinging lines. Then Doña Mariquita took the guitar, and followed him with song after song from Old Castille, and little by little the whole village gathered in the courtyard to listen. And the party, led by Olazábal and Doña Mariquita, danced through the door to join them.

Chapter 8

Epilogue.

IT was a year ago that I went from Madrid to Bilbao to order one of the dreams of my life—a thirty-foot yawl built by my friend Ramon Echegaray. They told me at the yard that he was in some unheard-of village in Asturias, badly hurt by the explosion of a petrol tank. I could get no other information until one afternoon when the waiter at the Harbour Café telephoned me that Don Ramon had returned. I found him at his usual table, accompanied by an attractive boy who was introduced to me as Don Ricardo Echegaray Garland.

Echegaray had his right arm in a sling, and was pounding the table with his left.

“Fools!” he said. “Fools! They’re all fools! Sit down, amigo!”

“Who are fools?” I asked.

“The admiralty. They say I’m crazy, that Olazábal and his crew were drunk, that Father Juan is suffering from senile decay, and that if we saw anything at all it was a seal!”

“Begin,” I suggested, “at the beginning.”

“I will,” said Echegaray.

And for two hours he held me spellbound with the story, occasionally turning to Dick for corroboration.

"Have you any idea what the beast was?" I asked when he had finished.

"I hardly saw it," Echegaray said, "and so I can't tell. But I got together some pictures of extinct reptiles and asked Ricardito and the other four to pick the one that most resembled it. They all chose a creature called a plesiosaur."

"It was bigger than any of the fossil plesiosaurs," added Dick. "Because it was very old, I expect."

"And what was the mess on its forehead?" I asked.

"According to my doctor," answered Don Ramon, "it was a pineal eye, partly degenerated."

"Well," I said, "if you can get the skeletons of its ancestors out of the cave, you'll have proof enough for any admiralty."

"We tried last week," said Echegaray, "but we couldn't go more than a hundred feet beyond the rock. The explosions loosened the walls and roof of the channel, and at the next high tide they fell in. I've got half a dozen men searching the foothills right now for the entrance into the last cave—the rift through which the sun fell on the blue algæ. When I've found it, there'll be headlines in all the papers on earth."

"Meanwhile, do you mind if I write the story as fiction?"

"*Hombre!* Why not?" exclaimed Echegaray, surprised and pleased at the idea. "We'll drive over to Zumaya and have a talk to Olazábal, and then if you have time you could spend a week with Don Enrico at Villadonga and look over the ground."

I did—and here is the story.

Por lo presente declaramos que los hechos más arriba contados por Don Godofredo Household, con excepción de lo que se ha suprimido por motivo de la discreción, son conformes a la verdad.

This is to certify that the facts as told above by Mr. Geoffrey Household conform to the truth, apart from such alterations as have been made for reasons of discretion.