

CHAPTER 53

Genoese Mariners - St. Michael's Cave - Midnight Abysses - Young American - A Slave Proprietor - The Fairy Man - Infidelity.

Throughout the whole of that night it blew very hard, but as the wind was in the Levant quarter, I had no apprehension of being detained longer at Gibraltar on that account. I went on board the vessel at an early hour, when I found the crew engaged in hauling the anchor close, and making other preparations for sailing. They informed me that we should probably start in an hour. That time however passed, and we still remained where we were, and the captain continued on shore. We formed one of a small flotilla of Genoese barks, the crews of which seemed in their leisure moments to have no better means of amusing themselves than the exchange of abusive language; a furious fusillade of this kind presently commenced, in which the mate of our vessel particularly distinguished himself; he was a grey-haired Genoese of sixty. Though not able to speak their patois, I understood much of what was said; it was truly shocking, and as they shouted it forth, judging from their violent gestures and distorted features, you would have concluded them to be bitter enemies; they were, however, nothing of the kind, but excellent friends all the time, and indeed very good-humoured fellows at bottom. Oh, the infirmities of human nature! When will man learn to become truly Christian?

I am upon the whole very fond of the Genoese; they have, it is true, much ribaldry and many vices, but they are a brave and chivalrous people, and have ever been so, and from them I have never experienced aught but kindness and hospitality.

After the lapse of another two hours, the Jew secretary arrived and said something to the old mate, who grumbled much; then coming up to me, he took off his hat and informed me that we were not to start that day, saying at the same time that it was a shame to lose such a noble wind, which would carry us to Tangier in three hours. "Patience," said I, and went on shore.



53.1 St Michael's Cave

I now strolled towards Saint Michael's cave, in company with the Jewish lad whom I have before mentioned.

The way thither does not lie in the same direction as that which leads to the excavations; these confront Spain, whilst the cave yawns in the face of Africa. It lies nearly at the top of the mountain, several hundred yards above the sea. We passed by the public walks, where there are noble trees, and also by many small houses, situated delightfully in gardens, and occupied by the officers of the garrison. It is wrong to suppose Gibraltar a mere naked barren rock; it is not without its beautiful spots - spots such as these, looking cool and refreshing, with bright green foliage. The path soon became very steep, and we left behind us the dwellings of man. The gale of the preceding night had entirely ceased, and not a breath of air was stirring; the midday sun shone in all its fierce glory, and the crags up which we clambered were not unfrequently watered with the perspiration drops which rained from our temples: at length we arrived at the cavern.

The mouth is a yawning cleft in the side of the mountain, about twelve feet high and as many wide; within there is a very rapid precipitous descent for some fifty yards, where the cavern terminates in an abyss which leads to unknown depths. The most remarkable object is a natural column, which rises up something like the trunk of an enormous oak, as if for the purpose of supporting the roof; it stands at a short distance from the entrance, and gives a certain air of wildness and singularity to that part of the cavern which is visible, which it would otherwise not possess. The floor is exceedingly slippery, consisting of soil which the continual drippings from the roof have saturated, so that no slight precaution is necessary for him who treads it. It is very dangerous to enter this place without a guide well acquainted with it, as, besides the black pit at the extremity, holes which have never been fathomed present themselves here and there, falling into which the adventurer would be dashed to pieces. Whatever men may please to say of this cave, one thing it seems to tell to all who approach it, namely, that the hand of man has never been busy about it; there is many a cave of nature's forming, old as the earth on which we exist, which nevertheless exhibits indications that man has turned it to some account, and that it has been subjected more or less to his modifying power; not so this cave of Gibraltar, for, judging from its appearance, there is not the slightest reason for supposing that it ever served for aught else than a den for foul night birds, reptiles, and beasts of prey. It has been stated by some to have been used in the days of paganism as a temple to the god Hercules, who, according to the ancient tradition, raised the singular mass of crags now called Gibraltar, and the mountain which confronts it on the African shores, as columns which should say to all succeeding times that he had *been* there, and had advanced no farther. Sufficient to observe, that there is nothing within the cave which would authorize the adoption of such an opinion, not even a platform on which an altar could have stood, whilst a narrow path passes before it, leading to the summit of the mountain. As I have myself never penetrated into its depths, I can of course not pretend to describe them. Numerous have been the individuals who, instigated by curiosity, have ventured down to immense depths, hoping to discover an end, and indeed scarcely a week passes without similar attempts being made either by the officers or soldiers of the garrison, all of which have proved perfectly abortive. No termination has ever been reached, nor any discoveries made to repay the labour and frightful danger incurred; precipice succeeds precipice, and abyss succeeds abyss, in apparently endless succession, with ledges at intervals, which afford the adventurers opportunities for resting themselves and affixing their rope-ladders for the purpose of descending yet farther. What is, however, most mortifying and

perplexing is to observe that these abysses are not only before, but behind you, and on every side; indeed, close within the entrance of the cave, on the right, there is a gulf almost equally dark and full as threatening as that which exists at the nether end, and perhaps contains within itself as many gulfs and horrid caverns branching off in all directions. Indeed, from what I have heard, I have come to the opinion, that the whole hill of Gibraltar is honeycombed, and I have little doubt that, were it cleft asunder, its interior would be found full of such abysses of Erebus¹ as those to which Saint Michael's cave conducts. Many valuable lives are lost every year in these horrible places; and only a few weeks before my visit, two sergeants, brothers, had perished in the gulf on the right hand side of the cave, having, when at a great depth, slipped down a precipice. The body of one of these adventurous men is even now rotting in the bowels of the mountain, preyed upon by its blind and noisome worms; that of his brother was extricated. Immediately after this horrible accident, a gate was placed before the mouth of the cave, to prevent individuals, and especially the reckless soldiers, from indulging in their extravagant curiosity. The lock, however, was speedily forced, and at the period of my arrival the gate swung idly upon its hinges.

As I left the place, I thought that perhaps similar to this was the cave of Horeb, where dwelt Elijah, when he heard the still small voice, after the great and strong wind which rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; the cave to the entrance of which he went out and stood with his face wrapped in his mantle, when he heard the voice say unto him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (1 Kings xix. 11- 13.)

And what am I doing here, I inquired of myself as, vexed at my detention, I descended into the town.

That afternoon I dined in the company of a young American, a native of South Carolina. I had frequently seen him before, as he had been staying for some time at the inn previous to my arrival at Gibraltar. His appearance was remarkable: he was low of stature, and exceedingly slightly made; his features were pale but very well formed; he had a magnificent head of crispy black hair, and as superb a pair of whiskers of the same colour as I ever beheld. He wore a white hat, with broad brim and particularly shallow crown, and was dressed in a light yellow gingham frock striped with black, and ample trousers of calico, in a word, his appearance was altogether queer and singular. On my return from my ramble to the cave, I found that he had himself just descended from the mountain, having since a very early hour been absent exploring its wonders.

A man of the rock asked him how he liked the excavations. "Liked them," said he; "you might just as well ask a person who has just seen the Niagara Falls how he liked them - like is not the word, mister." The heat was suffocating, as it almost invariably is in the town of Gibraltar, where rarely a breath of air is to be felt, as it is sheltered from all winds. This led another individual to inquire of him whether he did not think it exceedingly hot? "Hot, sir," he replied, "not at all: fine cotton gathering weather as a man could wish for. We couldn't beat it in South Carolina, sir." "You live in South Carolina, sir - I hope, sir, you are not a slave proprietor," said the short fat Jewish

¹ In Greek mythology (particularly Hesiod's *Theogony*): the primordial night, made up of deep darkness and thick shadow, that precedes the world's creation. Less abstract, it means 'the dark place', part of the underworld or the underworld itself.

personage in the snuff-coloured coat, who had offered me the bitters on a previous occasion²; "it is a terrible thing to make slaves of poor people, simply because they happen to be black; don't you think so, sir?" "Think so, sir - no, sir, I don't think so - I glory in being a slave proprietor; have four hundred black niggers on my estate - own estate, sir, near Charleston - flog half a dozen of them before breakfast, merely for exercise. Niggers only made to be flogged, sir: try to escape sometimes; set the bloodhounds in their trail, catch them in a twinkling; used to hang themselves formerly: the niggers thought that a sure way to return to their own country and get clear of me: soon put a stop to that: told them that if any more hanged themselves I'd hang myself too, follow close behind them, and flog them in their own country ten times worse than in mine. What do you think of that, friend?" It was easy to perceive that there was more of fun than malice in this eccentric little fellow, for his large grey eyes were sparkling with good humour whilst he poured out these wild things.³ He was exceedingly free of his money; and a dirty Irish woman, a soldier's wife, having entered with a basketful of small boxes and trinkets, made of portions of the rock of Gibraltar, he purchased the greatest part of her ware, giving her for every article the price (by no means inconsiderable) which she demanded. He had glanced at me several times, and at last I saw him stoop down and whisper something to the Jew, who replied in an undertone, though with considerable earnestness "O dear no, sir; perfectly mistaken, sir: is no American, sir:- from Salamanca, sir; the gentleman is a Salamancan Spaniard." The waiter at length informed us that he had laid the table, and that perhaps it would be agreeable to us to dine together: we instantly assented. I found my new acquaintance in many respects a most agreeable companion: he soon told me his history. He was a planter, and, from what he hinted, just come to his property. He was part owner of a large vessel which traded between Charleston and Gibraltar, and the yellow fever having just broken out at the former place, he had determined to take a trip (his first) to Europe in this ship; having, as he said, already visited every state in the Union, and seen all that was to be seen there. He described to me, in a very naive and original manner, his sensations on passing by Tarifa, which was the first walled town he had ever seen. I related to him the history of that place, to which he listened with great attention. He made divers attempts to learn from me who I was; all of which I evaded, though he seemed fully convinced that I was an American; and amongst other things asked me whether my father had not been American consul at Seville. What, however, most perplexed him was my understanding Moorish and Gaelic, which he had heard me speak respectively to the hamalos and the Irish woman, the latter of whom, as he said,

² I.e. Solomons, from chapter 52 above.

³ Unfortunately, there can be much malice in fun; and George Borrow was an outright S.O.B. when it came to blacks. As the reader surely will have noticed in the course of the present book, Borrow never spared the vicious adjectives when describing un-beloved individuals from racial minorities. This happens even when it comes to the Gypsies and the Jews, groups with whom he did associate closely and whom he appreciated for their accomplishments and virtues. In blacks, he never discerned any good qualities or virtues, and consequently the venom he bestows on them is unsurpassed (see for instance Knapp, II : 203; *Wild Wales*, chapter 3; Fraser in *GBB* 19, 21-23). Since he was an emotional conservative, allergic to all humanitarian social movements such as the temperance movement, Irish emancipation and animal protection, his ire was increased by the strong anti-slavery drive alive in the Britain of his day (see *Wild Wales*, chapter 42; and Knapp II : 102 on his furious contempt for '*Uncle Tom's Cabin*'). As such, it is no coincidence that the cause of black slaves is here defended by Solomons, the single most disreputable person he met in Gibraltar.

had told him that I was a fairy man. At last he introduced the subject of religion, and spoke with much contempt of revelation, avowing himself a deist; he was evidently very anxious to hear my opinion, but here again I evaded him, and contented myself with asking him, whether he had ever read the Bible. He said he had not; but that he was well acquainted with the writings of Volney and Mirabeau⁴. I made no answer; whereupon he added, that it was by no means his habit to introduce such subjects, and that there were very few persons to whom he would speak so unreservedly, but that I had very much interested him, though our acquaintance had been short. I replied, that he would scarcely have spoken at Boston in the manner that I had just heard him, and that it was easy to perceive that he was not a New Englander. "I assure you," said he, "I should as little have thought of speaking so at Charleston, for if I held such conversation there, I should soon have had to speak to myself."

Had I known less of deists than it has been my fortune to know, I should perhaps have endeavoured to convince this young man of the erroneousness of the ideas which he had adopted; but I was aware of all that he would have urged in reply, and as the believer has no carnal arguments to address to carnal reason upon this subject, I thought it best to avoid disputation, which I felt sure would lead to no profitable result. Faith is the free gift of God, and I do not believe that ever yet was an infidel converted by means of after-dinner polemics. This was the last evening of my sojourn in Gibraltar.

⁴ For Volney see footnote 20 to chapter 3 above. Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, Count Mirabeau (1749-1791) was a prominent orator and politician during the early phase of the French Revolution. What 'writings' the American had in mind is hard to say. Mirabeau's oeuvre consists mostly of pamphlets and speeches.