

LOST!

I. Escape

“Alerta!”

A gunshot followed the shout of alarm from the Spanish sentry of the Ceuta presidio. In the almost pitch black night surrounding the penal colony a shadow disappeared, melting into the gloom.

The soldiers, however, and the Moroccan foremen were running around. A Lieutenant cried out, “Caramba! Search everywhere! Bayonets fixed!”

The troops spread out and examined the ground as carefully as they could in the weak light of the lanterns carried on poles by the Arabs.

A cannon fired, rumbling long and muted through the mountains, announcing to the coast that a prisoner had just escaped.

At the same time inside the presidio they took roll call in the convicts’ dormitory. The missing number was quickly found to be 3516, a certain Antonio Perez y Rosal.

“Demonio!” the director of the presidio muttered, “A political prisoner!”

Known now as a political prisoner the escapee aroused two very distinct feelings among the administrative and military personnel. The men in charge felt anger mixed with fear. The subordinates, however, felt a little sympathetic. They told themselves that, after all, if one of the prisoners under their guard managed to regain his freedom, it was better that it was not a murderer or a thief.

Perez, in fact, had committed no crime other than living in troubled times in a small Andalusian town and falling afoul of the mayor. With a solid education and having traveled and seen a lot, Perez had wanted to open a school in Alcala del Valle, his hometown. In Spain, education is free: a professor does as he wants as long as he does not rock the boat. On the other hand, the power of the local authorities has stayed almost dictatorial in many places, especially in Andalusia, a quasi-African land where the spirit of the Middle Ages lives on. Antonio Perez’s system of education had the bad luck of displeasing the mayor who took it upon himself to close the school.

A bitter war broke out between the two men who quickly got supporters on both sides. A little later a farm workers strike broke out in the area. It was scarred by bloody confrontations. Even in Alcala there were casualties among the farmers and wounded among the police. Perez had not played even a minor role in the agitation, but the opportunity to get rid of him, the enemy, was too perfect for the mayor to ignore.

And the poor man, accused of being an instigator of the revolt, was sentenced by a war council to 20 years of hard labor!

They shipped him off to Ceuta, the biggest penal colony Spain had on the Moroccan coast. The others are Melilla, Alhucemas and the Penon de la Gomera, not to mention the prison on the Chafirinas Islands.

He spent three years in this hell amidst the worst offenders under the bludgeons of the Arab foremen who were more vicious than the prisoners and glad to be lording it over Europeans.

Perez had already seen many of his partners in misfortune die under their blows or from hardship. Besides the fact that the sweltering weather did not help the appetite much, the *rancho*, an awful liquid mush that the dogs refused and that was his daily meal, was not enough to keep up his strength. He had become terribly thin. At times he felt like a cloud was passing before his eyes, like his blood had frozen and his heart stopped beating.

“But I don’t want to die here!” he repeated to himself with fierce determination.

The day after his sentencing he was obsessed with only one thing: escape!

But how?

On board the *Pelayo*, which had transported him to Ceuta, he stayed down in the hold with his fellow prisoners in the looming darkness. After getting off they had thrown him into a team repairing the buildings around the penal colony under constant, relentless surveillance. Then he had been sent from one work site to another, all of them well guarded.

Finally, after three lethal years, an opportunity to escape arose. The *capataz* or barracks boss, thinking that everyone was asleep, dozed off after one too many gulps of *anisado* and Perez, with his mind incessantly focused on the same goal, took swift advantage of it.

As supple as a snake he slipped out of the dark building and snuck past the guard on duty just when his back was turned. He had one circumstance on his side: it was the new moon and only the stars were shining in the dark sky.

Nevertheless, as careful as he was to stay close to the ground and hold his breath, he kicked over a small rock that rolled off and gave him away. He had just passed the second guardhouse at the gate in the outer wall of the presidio.

Perez jumped up like a lunatic and was out of sight in no time. The guard, dazed and confused, hesitated a moment before firing at random, not so much to hit the fugitive as to sound the alarm. Perez felt the bullet whistle by an inch over his head.

A few minutes later the fugitive was scrambling down into the town. The rhythmic march of the patrol rang in his ears. Dim lights pierced the darkness in places, glowing behind the curtains of houses or from the rare street lamps. The sound of a *guzzla*, an old fiddle, died off in the distance.

Perez hurtled through the shadows into a maze of narrow alleyways to evade the patrol entering the town, which he knew nothing about. The only thing about Ceuta he knew was the penal colony!

When the sound of the pounding boots grew dimmer the prisoner started wandering around haphazardly. Angry barking mixed with monotone and nasal singing told him that he was approaching the black-Arab quarter. Perez veered cautiously to his left. A straight, dark line stood before him. It was the ramparts of Ceuta.

A sudden thought flashed in his mind: he could not get out through the gate being guarded by sentinels. Was he condemned to be imprisoned in this city, wandering around until he was captured by a patrol and thrown back into prison, this time never to leave again?

His heart sank in despair. But no! He would rather jump off the ramparts and smash his skull in a ditch.

As he was thinking this, he tripped over something. He bent down, reached out and felt the ground. It was a rope, used during the day as a clothesline and stretched out on the ground now like a long snake. They had left it here, lying useless.

For the fugitive it was salvation. A minute later the rope was tied to a tree growing next to the rampart with the other end thrown over the wall. Perez shimmied down into the ditch and when he felt his feet touch the ground he was off again.

Still in unknown territory, more than ever in the dark, he ran as fast as he could away from Ceuta.

II. A Risky Swim

Ceuta, in Arab Sebtah, is a strongly fortified city enclosed on a peninsula. The sea and the walls built on the isthmus surround it with an impregnable barrier lined with cannons. The Spanish who took it over in 1570 have guarded it ever since, using it in their many sieges against the Moroccans. One of these sieges at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century lasted 26 years!

The city is totally white with finely wrought balconies and flowery terraces. Clean, quiet, stretching out between the twin blues of the sky and the sea, Ceuta gives the impression of a calm, sweet life. In spite of the attacks that once raged around its walls you could choose it for the location of some oblivious fantasy.

But this Eden has a hell: the penal colony! There in the blazing sun, haggard, hungry and dressed in rags because the prison administration thinks that clothes are a waste of money, the poor devils from all over are herded together by the loaded rifles of sentinels, the pistols of the guards and the clubs of the Arab foremen. You can see all kinds, all characters among them: the *salteador*, the highwayman, the murderer who took justice into his own hands, the clever thief and sometimes also the innocent thrown into prison because the stars were against him.

Perez was ready to do anything to avoid getting caught and thrown back into that place of mental and physical torture.

He looked around to get his bearings. If it were daytime he would have seen the bulk of Mount Acho behind him along with the Almina Peninsula and the isle of Santa Catalina; before him the fortifications of old Ceuta. But besides the fact that he had only a vague notion of the area's topography, the escapee could not see through the curtain of darkness. He saw only 30 feet in front of him.

Suddenly he listened carefully. He was not mistaken. He heard the rumbling of the sea on both his right and left. He had not left the narrow isthmus that connected the Ceuta Peninsula to the continent. And he remembered that another fortified and guarded border should be formed across the entrance to this isthmus. At least that was what the stories of his fellow captives, the few who had failed to escape, had taught him.

Perez made a quick decision. He veered off to the left, guided by the sound of the waves that grew louder and louder. Soon the salty sea breeze was whipping his face. At the same time glowing points came and went on the dark, shifting surface, making it hard to tell the difference between the sea and the equally dark sky with its glimmering stars.

"I must be in the Madrague Bay," Perez thought. The Madrague Bay, Vina Bay and Point Zorra to the southeast and the Campo Rocks to the northwest was all that the prisoner knew about the area.

His feet suddenly felt something warm and wet. He had reached the edge of the sea. A row of lights burned in the night a long way off.

The fugitive kept walking into the sea, water up his ankles, then to his waist. Finally he made up his mind to start swimming, guided by the points of light that must surely be the coastline.

His plan was to use the sea to skirt by the obstacle that he had no hope of getting through directly. He had already managed to slip out of the presidio, then get over a wall, but he could not hope to be three times lucky. That would be tempting fate. Better to reach the other coast by swimming a safe distance from Ceuta.

Perez was a good swimmer and the desire to regain his freedom boosted his strength. For 20 minutes he wheeled his vigorous arms. At about this time he realized that the lights looked just as far away and he started to feel anxious.

His clothes were soaked, sticking to his skin and soon bound to drag him down. In fact, he wore only a loose jacket, a simple shirt and gray canvas pants, plus a pair of *alpargatas* or espadrilles.

With a great deal of effort Perez managed to take off the jacket and shirt and he felt instantly relieved. Wisely he kept on his pants and espadrilles.

To catch his breath he floated on his back, still drifting toward the lit up coastline. All of a sudden something hit his head and stunned him. He was starting to sink when he felt something grab hold of his

arms and legs and waist all at the same time. But it was not human hands clutching him. The squishy, cold, sticky embrace followed quickly by the feeling of suckers immediately woke him up—there was no mistaking the tentacles of an octopus!

The swimmer had bumped into a rock jutting out of the water and the shock had attracted the mollusk that had been sleeping or lying in wait for some prey. The eight tentacles, like eight different snakes, immediately attacked Perez, imprisoning him in their coils and sucking hard.

The fugitive felt his whole body tremble and revolt against the filthy feeling at the same time as his blood started pumping hard through his veins. The octopus stared at him with its phosphorescent eye and its calm, merciless glare was terrifying.

The mouth of the gelatinous monster, a weird mouth that looked like a parrot's, was already getting ready to taste his poor flesh.

Perez knew the power of the enemy he had just been trapped by. The octopus, the great hunter of crabs and lobsters, had no fear of attacking enemies such as man. It was as smart as it was ferocious: they had been seen putting a rock between the two valves of big shellfish to keep them from closing up while they fed.

To fight against this misshapen and terrible ogre of the sea Perez had no weapon. His muscles were already tired from the slaving away during the long swim and were powerless against the tentacles and their suckers. His hands struggled in vain to grab the jelly beast: the soft, slimy surface kept slipping out of his grasp.

He felt lost and could not help crying out in despair.

His cry had an answer. A voice came out of the sea speaking two words in Spanish: "Quien vive?" (Who's there?)

Immediately afterward a light shined out of the jumbled mess of a boat and in this boat was a man.

Panting, weary, half-suffocating, Perez could not see the boat well or the person inside. But the other had seen the tragic drama. With a single stroke of his oar he came straight to the two fighters and grabbed hold of Perez, who was sinking fast, along with the clinging octopus.

An instant later the fugitive was lying on the bottom of the boat. The body of the mollusk was as dead as a doornail. The head, its only vulnerable part, which the man had cut off with a knife, was lying next to it, a shapeless, slimy thing.

The savior was one of the Spanish-Arab mixes with rugged looks, a black beard and eyes that shined like rubies. Dressed simply in a sweater with bare legs but wearing a fez, he brought his lantern over to examine Perez with grim curiosity, more curiosity than pity.

Amar Beloud, the name of the man, had been a tuna fisherman since he was a kid. While lying in his boat he had heard the distress call from the struggling Spaniard. But more than anything this was a practical man and he was no fool for silly sentiments. One look at the shaved face and the fabric of the pants was enough to tell him exactly who this man was whom he had snatched from the clutches of death.

"An escaped convict," he muttered.

Now, not only was helping a convict to escape a punishable crime but a reward was given to whomever brought one of these poor men back to the presidio.

"Nice catch!" he said aloud. And he bent down to look for a rope to tie up the prisoner sent to him by fate.

Perez was coming around, heard the exclamation and understood what was happening. The fisherman had saved him from the octopus only to send him back to his jailors.

There was no time to waste. He tripped and pushed the mestizo headfirst overboard. At the same time, grabbing the oars, he sent the boat skimming over the water while his savior and enemy, stunned by the sudden attack, floundered in the waves.

When Amar realized what had happened and wanted to get his skiff back, it was already a long ways off, invisible, vanished in the darkness because Perez had blown out the lantern whose light would have given him away.