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Romance

By

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TO

ELSIE AND JESSIE

"C'est toi qui dors dans Vombre, O sacré Souvenir." If we could have
remembrance now And see, as in the days to come We shall, what's
venturous in these hours: The swift, intangible romance of fields at
home, The gleams of sun, the showers, Our workaday contentments,
or our powers To fare still forward through the uncharted haze Of
present days. . . . For, looking back when years shall flow Upon this
olden day that's now, We'll see, romantic in dimm'd hours, These
memories of ours.

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PART FIRST -- THE QUARRY AND THE BEACH

ROMANCE

CHAPTER ONE

To yesterday and to to-day I say my polite "vaya usted con Dios." What are these days to me? But that far-off day of my romance, when from between the blue and white bales in Don Ramon's darkened storeroom, at Kingston, I saw the door open before the figure of an old man with the tired, long, white face, that day I am not likely to forget. I remember the chilly smell of the typical West Indian store, the indescribable smell of damp gloom, of locos, of pimento, of olive oil, of new sugar, of new rum; the glassy double sheen of Ramon's great spectacles, the piercing eyes in the mahogany face, while the tap, tap, tap of a cane on the flags went on behind the inner door; the click of the latch; the stream of light. The door, petulantly thrust inwards, struck against some barrels. I remember the rattling of the bolts on that door, and the tall figure that appeared there, snuffbox in hand. In that land of white clothes, that precise, ancient, Castilian in black was something to remember. The black cane that had made the tap, tap, tap dangled by a silken cord from the hand whose delicate blue-veined, wrinkled wrist ran back into a foam of lawn ruffles. The other hand paused in the act of conveying a pinch of snuff to the nostrils of the hooked nose that had, on the skin stretched tight over the bridge, the polish of old ivory; the elbow pressing the black cocked-hat against the side; the legs, one bent, the other bowing a little back--this was the attitude of Seraphina's father.

Having imperiously thrust the door of the inner room open, he remained immovable, with no intention of entering, and called in a harsh, aged voice: "Señor Ramon! Señor Ramon!" and then twice: "Sera-phina--Seraphina!" turning his head back.

Then for the first time I saw Seraphina, looking over her father's shoulder. I remember her face on that day; her eyes were gray--the gray of black, not of blue. For a moment they looked me straight in the face, reflectively, unconcerned, and then travelled to the spectacles of old Ramon.

This glance--remember I was young on that day--had been enough to set me wondering what they were thinking of me; what they could have seen of me.

"But there he is--your Señor Ramon," she said to her father, as if she were chiding him for a petulance in calling; "your sight is not very good, my poor little father--there he is, your Ramon."

The warm reflection of the light behind her, gilding the curve of her face from ear to chin, lost itself in the shadows of black lace falling from dark hair that was not quite black. She spoke as if the words clung to her lips; as if she had to put them forth delicately for fear of damaging the frail things. She raised her long hand to a white flower that clung above her ear like the pen of a clerk, and disappeared. Ramon hurried with a stiffness of immense respect towards the ancient grandee. The door swung to.

I remained alone. The blue bales and the white, and the great red oil jars loomed in the dim light filtering through the jalousies out of the blinding sunlight of Jamaica. A moment after, the door opened once more and a young man came out to me; tall, slim, with very bright, very large black eyes aglow in an absolute pallor of face. That was Carlos Riego.

Well, that is my yesterday of romance, for the many things that have passed between those times and now have become dim or have gone out of my mind. And my day before yesterday was the day on which I, at twenty-two, stood looking at myself in the tall glass, the day on which I left my home in Kent and went, as chance willed it, out to sea with Carlos Riego.

That day my cousin Rooksby had become engaged to my sister Veronica, and I had a fit of jealous misery. I was rawboned, with fair hair, I had a good skin, tanned by the weather, good teeth, and brown eyes. I had not had a very happy life, and I had lived shut in on myself, thinking of the wide world beyond my reach, that seemed to hold out infinite possibilities of romance, of adventure, of love, perhaps, and stores of gold. In the family my mother counted; my father did not. She was the daughter of a Scottish earl who had ruined himself again and again. He had been an inventor, a projector, and my mother had been a poor beauty, brought up on the farm we still lived on--the last rag of land that had remained to her father. Then she had married a good man in his way; a good enough catch; moderately well off, very amiable, easily influenced, a dilettante, and a bit of a dreamer, too. He had taken her into the swim of the Regency, and his purse had not held out. So my mother, asserting herself, had insisted upon a return to our farm, which had been her dowry. The alternative would have been a shabby, ignominious life at Calais, in the shadow of Brummel and such.

My father used to sit all day by the fire, inscribing "ideas" every now and then in a pocket-book. I think he was writing an epic poem, and I think he was happy in an ineffectual way. He had thin red hair, untidy for want of a valet, a shining,

delicate, hooked nose, narrow-lidded blue eyes, and a face with the colour and texture of a white-heart cherry. He used to spend his days in a hooded chair. My mother managed everything, leading an out-of-door life which gave her face the colour of a wrinkled pippin. It was the face of a Roman mother, tight-lipped, brown-eyed, and fierce. You may understand the kind of woman she was from the hands she employed on the farm. They were smugglers and night-malefactors to a man--and she liked that. The decent, slow-witted, gently devious type of rustic could not live under her. The neighbours round declared that the Lady Mary Kemp's farm was a hotbed of disorder. I expect it was, too; three of our men were hung up at Canterbury on one day--for horse-stealing and arson.... Anyhow, that was my mother. As for me, I was under her, and, since I had my aspirations, I had a rather bitter childhood. And I had others to contrast myself with. First there was Rooksby: a pleasant, well-spoken, amiable young squire of the immediate neighbourhood; young Sir Ralph, a man popular with all sorts, and in love with my sister Veronica from early days. Veronica was very beautiful, and very gentle, and very kind; tall, slim, with sloping white shoulders and long white arms, hair the colour of amber, and startled blue eyes--a good mate for Rooksby. Rooksby had foreign relations, too. The uncle from whom he inherited the Priory had married a Riego, a Castilian, during the Peninsular war. He had been a prisoner at the time--he had died in Spain, I think. When Ralph made the grand tour, he had made the acquaintance of his Spanish relations; he used to talk about them, the Riegos, and Veronica used to talk of what he said of them until they came to stand for Romance, the romance of the outer world, to me. One day, a little before Ralph and Veronica became engaged, these Spaniards descended out of the blue. It was Romance suddenly dangled right before my eyes. It was Romance; you have no idea what it meant to me to talk to Carlos Riego.

Rooksby was kind enough. He had me over to the Priory, where I made the acquaintance of the two maiden ladies, his second cousins, who kept house for him. Yes, Ralph was kind; but I rather hated him for it, and was a little glad when he, too, had to suffer some of the pangs of jealousy--jealousy of Carlos Riego.

Carlos was dark, and of a grace to set Ralph as much in the shade as Ralph himself set me; and Carlos had seen a deal more of the world than Ralph. He had a foreign sense of humour that made him forever ready to sacrifice his personal dignity. It made Veronica laugh, and even drew a grim smile from my mother; but it gave Ralph bad moments. How he came into these parts was a little of a mystery. When Ralph was displeased with this Spanish connection he used to swear that Carlos had cut a throat or taken a purse. At other times he used to say that it was a political matter. In fine, Carlos had the hospitality of the Priory, and the title of Count when he chose to use it. He brought with him a short, pousy, bearded companion, half friend, half servant, who said he had served in Napoleon's Spanish contingent, and had a way of striking his breast with a

wooden hand (his arm had suffered in a cavalry charge), and exclaiming, "I, Tomas Castro! . . ." He was an Andalusian.

For myself, the first shock of his strangeness over-come, I adored Carlos, and Veronica liked him, and laughed at him, till one day he said good-bye and rode off along the London road, followed by his Tomas Castro. I had an intense longing to go with him out into the great world that brooded all round our foothills.

You are to remember that I knew nothing whatever of that great world. I had never been further away from our farm than just to Canterbury school, to Hythe market, to Romney market. Our farm nestled down under the steep, brown downs, just beside the Roman road to Canterbury; Stone Street--the Street--we called it. Ralph's land was just on the other side of the Street, and the shepherds on the downs used to see of nights a dead-and-gone Rooksby, Sir Peter that was, ride upon it past the quarry with his head under his arm. I don't think I believed in him, but I believed in the smugglers who shared the highway with that horrible ghost. It is impossible for any one nowadays-to conceive the effect these smugglers had upon life thereabouts and then. They were the power to which everything else deferred. They used to overrun the country in great bands, and brooked no interference with their business. Not long before they had defeated regular troops in a pitched battle on the Marsh, and on the very day I went away I remember we couldn't do our carting because the smugglers had given us notice they would need our horses in the evening. They were a power in the land where there was violence enough without them, God knows! Our position on that Street put us in the midst of it all. At dusk we shut our doors, pulled down our blinds, sat round the fire, and knew pretty well what was going on outside. There would be long whistles in the dark, and when we found men lurking in our barns we feigned not to see them--it was safer so. The smugglers--the Free Traders, they called themselves--were as well organized for helping malefactors out of the country as for running goods in; so it came about that we used to have comers and forgers, murderers and French spies--all sorts of malefactors--hiding in our straw throughout the day, wait-for the whistle to blow from the Street at dusk. I, born with my century, was familiar with these things; but my mother forbade my meddling with them. I expect she knew enough herself--all the resident gentry did. But Ralph--though he was to some extent of the new school, and used to boast that, if applied to, he "would grant a warrant against any Free Trader"--never did, as a matter of fact, or not for many years.

Carlos, then, Rooksby's Spanish kinsman, had come and gone, and I envied him his going, with his air of mystery, to some far-off lawless adventures--perhaps over there in Spain, where there were war and rebellion. Shortly afterwards Rooksby proposed for the hand of Veronica and was accepted--by my mother. Veronica went about looking happy. That upset me, too. It seemed unjust that

she should go out into the great world--to Bath, to Brighton, should see the Prince Regent and the great fights on Hounslow Heath--whilst I was to remain forever a farmer's boy. That afternoon I was upstairs, looking at the reflection of myself in the tall glass, wondering miserably why I seemed to be such an oaf.

The voice of Rooksby hailed me suddenly from downstairs. "Hey, John--John Kemp; come down, I say!"

I started away from the glass as if I had been taken in an act of folly. Rooksby was flicking his leg with his switch in the doorway, at the bottom of the narrow flight of stairs.

He wanted to talk to me, he said, and I followed him out through the yard on to the soft road that climbs the hill to westward. The evening was falling slowly and mournfully; it was dark already in the folds of the sombre downs.

We passed the corner of the orchard. "I know what you've got to tell me," I said. "You're going to marry Veronica. Well, you've no need of my blessing. Some people have all the luck. Here am I . . . look at me!"

Ralph walked with his head bent down.

"Confound it," I said, "I shall run away to sea! I tell you, I'm rotting, rotting! There! I say, Ralph, give me Carlos' direction...." I caught hold of his arm. "I'll go after him. He'd show me a little life. He said he would."

Ralph remained lost in a kind of gloomy abstraction, while I went on worrying him for Carlos' address.

"Carlos is the only soul I know outside five miles from here. Besides, he's friends in the Indies. That's where I want to go, and he could give me a cast. You remember what Tomas Castro said. . . ."

Rooksby came to a sudden halt, and began furiously to switch his corded legs.

"Curse Carlos, and his Castro, too. They'll have me in jail betwixt them. They're both in my red barn, if you want their direction. . . ."

He hurried on suddenly up the hill, leaving me gazing upwards at him. When I caught him up he was swearing--as one did in those days--and stamping his foot in the middle of the road.

"I tell you," he said violently, "it's the most accursed business! That Castro, with

his Cuba, is nothing but a blasted buccaneer... and Carlos is no better. They go to Liverpool for a passage to Jamaica, and see what comes of it!"

It seems that on Liverpool docks, in the owl-light, they fell in with an elderly hunk just returned from West Indies, who asks the time at the door of a shipping agent. Castro pulls out a watch, and the old fellow jumps on it, vows it's his own, taken from him years before by some picaroons on his outward voyage. Out from the agent's comes another, and swears that Castro is one of the self-same crew. He himself purported to be the master of the very ship. Afterwards--in the solitary dusk among the ropes and bales--there had evidently been some play with knives, and it ended with a flight to London, and then down to Rooksby's red barn, with the runners in full cry after them.

"Think of it," Rooksby said, "and me a justice, and... oh, it drives me wild, this hole-and-corner work! There's a filthy muddle with the Free Traders--a whistle to blow after dark at the quarry. To-night of all nights, and me a justice... and as good as a married man!"

I looked at him wonderingly in the dusk; his high coat collar almost hid his face, and his hat was pressed down over his eyes. The thing seemed incredible to me. Here was an adventure, and I was shocked to see that Rooksby was in a pitiable state about it.

"But, Ralph," I said, "I would help Carlos."

"Oh, you," he said fretfully. "You want to run your head into a noose; that's what it comes to. Why, I may have to flee the country. There's the red-breasts poking their noses into every cottage on the Ashford road." He strode on again. A wisp of mist came stealing down the hill. "I can't give my cousin up. He could be smuggled out, right enough. But then I should have to get across salt water, too, for at least a year. Why----"

He seemed ready to tear his hair, and then I put in my say. He needed a little persuasion, though, in spite of Veronica.

I should have to meet Carlos Riego and Castro in a little fir-wood above the quarry, in half an hour's time. All I had to do was to whistle three bars of "Lillibulero," as a signal. A connection had been already arranged with the Free Traders on the road beside the quarry, and they were coming down that night, as we knew well enough, both of us. They were coming in force from Canterbury way down to the Marsh. It had cost Ralph a pretty penny; but, once in the hands of the smugglers, his cousin and Castro would be safe enough from the runners; it would have needed a troop of horse to take them. The difficulty was that of late

the smugglers themselves had become demoralized. There were ugly rumours of it; and there was a danger that Castro and Carlos, if not looked after, might end their days in some marsh-dyke. It was desirable that someone well known in our parts should see them to the seashore. A boat, there, was to take them out into the bay, where an outward-bound West Indiaman would pick them up. But for Ralph's fear for his neck, which had increased in value since its devotion to Veronica, he would have squired his cousin. As it was, he fluttered round the idea of letting me take his place. Finally he settled it; and I embarked on a long adventure.