PART SECOND -- THE GIRL WITH THE LIZARD

CHAPTER ONE

"Rio Medio?" Señor Ramon said to me nearly two years afterwards. "The caballero is pleased to give me credit for a very great knowledge. What should I know of that town? There are doubtless good men there and very wicked, as in other towns. Who knows? Your worship must ask the boats' crews that the admiral has sent to burn the town. They will be back very soon now."

He looked at me, inscrutably and attentively, through his gold spectacles.

It was on the arcade before his store in Spanish Town. Long sunblinds flapped slightly. Before the next door a large sign proclaimed "Office of the Buchatoro Journal" It was, as I have said, after two years--years which, as Carlos had predicted, I had found to be of hard work, and long, hot sameness. I had come down from Horton Pen to Spanish Town, expecting a letter from Veronica, and, the stage not being in, had dropped in to chat with Ramon over a consignment of Yankee notions, which he was prepared to sell at an extravagantly cheap price. It was just at the time when Admiral Rowley was understood to be going to make an energetic attempt upon the pirates who still infested the Gulf of Mexico and nearly ruined the Jamaica trade of those days. Naturally enough, we had talked of the mysterious town in which the pirates were supposed to have their headquarters.

"I know no more than others," Ramon said, "save, senor, that I lose much more because my dealings are much greater. But I do not even know whether those who take my goods are pirates, as you English say, or Mexican privateers, as the Havana authorities say. I do not very much care. Basta, what I know is that every week some ship with a letter of marque steals one of my consignments, and I lose many hundreds of dollars."

Ramon was, indeed, one of the most frequented merchants in Jamaica; he

had stores in both Kingston and Spanish Town; his cargoes came from all the seas. All the planters and all the official class in the island had dealings with him.

"It was most natural that the hidalgo, your respected cousin, should consult me if

he wished to go to any town in Cuba. Whom else should he go to? You yourself, señor, or the excellent Mr. Topnambo, if you desired to know what ships in a month's time are likely to be sailing for Havana, for New Orleans, or any Gulf port, you would ask me. What more natural? It is my business, my trade, to know these things. In that way I make my bread. But as for Rio Medio, I do not know the place." He had a touch of irony in his composed voice. "But it is very certain," he went on, "that if your Government had not recognized the belligerent rights of the rebellious colony of Mexico, there would be now no letters of marque, no accursed Mexican privateers, and I and everyone else in the island should not now be losing thousands of dollars every year."

That was the eternal grievance of every Spaniard in the island--and of not a few of the English and Scotch planters. Spain was still in the throes of losing the Mexican colonies when Great Britain had acknowledged the existence of a state of war and a Mexican Government. Mexican letters of marque had immediately filled the Gulf. No kind of shipping was safe from them, and Spain was quite honestly powerless to prevent their swarming on the coast of Cuba--the Ever Faithful Island, itself.

"What can Spain do," said Ramon bitterly, "when even your Admiral Rowley, with his great ships, cannot rid the sea of them?" He lowered his voice. "I tell you, young señor, that England will lose this Island of Jamaica over this business. You yourself are a Separationist, are you not?... No? You live with Separationists. How could I tell? Many people say you are."

His words gave me a distinctly disagreeable sensation. I hadn't any idea of being a Separationist; I was loyal enough. But I understood suddenly, and for the first time, how very much like one I might look.

"I myself am nothing," Ramon went on impassively; "I am content that the island should remain English. It will never again be Spanish, nor do I wish that it should. But our little, waspish friend there"--he lifted one thin, brown hand to the sign of the Buckatoro Journal--"his paper is doing much mischief. I think the admiral or the governor will commit him to jail. He is going to run away and take his paper to Kingston; I myself have bought his office furniture."

I looked at him and wondered, for all his impassivity, what he knew--what, in the depths of his inscrutable Spanish brain, his dark eyes concealed.

He bowed to me a little. "There will come a very great trouble," he said.

Jamaica was in those days--and remained for many years after--in the throes of a question. The question was, of course, that of the abolition of slavery. The

planters as a rule were immensely rich and overbearing. They said, "If the Home Government tries to abolish our slavery system, we will abolish the Home Government, and go to the United States for protection." That was treason, of course; but there was so much of it that the governor, the Duke of Manchester, had to close his ears and pretend not to hear. The planters had another grievance--the pirates in the Gulf of Mexico. There was one in particular, a certain El Demonio or Diableto, who practically sealed the Florida passage; it was hardly possible to get a cargo underwritten, and the planters' pockets felt it a good deal. Practically, El Demonio had, during the last two years, gutted a ship once a week, as if he wanted to help the Kingston Separationist papers. The planters said, "If the Home Government wishes to meddle with our internal affairs, our slaves, let it first clear our seas.... Let it hang El Demonio. . . ."

The Government had sent out one of Nelson's old captains, Admiral Rowley, a good fighting man; but when it came to clearing the Gulf of Mexico, he was about as useless as a prize-fighter trying to clear a stable of rats. I don't suppose El Demonio really did more than a tithe of the mischief attributed to him, but in the peculiar circumstances he found himself elevated to the rank of an important factor in colonial politics. The Ministerialist papers used to kill him once a month; the Separationists made him capture one of old Rowley's sloops five times a year. They both lied, of course. But obviously Rowley and his frigates weren't much use against a pirate whom they could not catch at sea, and who lived at the bottom of a bottle-necked creek with tooth rocks all over the entrance--that was the sort of place Rio Medio was reported to be. . . .

I didn't much care about either party--I was looking out for romance--but I inclined a little to the Separationists, because Macdonald, with whom I lived for two years at Horton Pen, was himself a Separationist, in a cool Scotch sort of way. He was an Argyleshire man, who had come out to the island as a lad in 1786, and had worked his way up to the position of agent to the Rooksby estate at Horton Pen. He had a little estate of his own, too, at the mouth of the River Minho, where he grew rice very profitably. He had been the first man to plant it on the island.

Horton Pen nestled down at the foot of the tall white scars that end the Vale of St. Thomas and are not much unlike Dover Cliffs, hanging over a sea of squares of the green cane, alternating with masses of pimento foliage. Macdonald's wife was an immensely stout, raven-haired, sloe-eyed, talkative body, the most motherly woman I have ever known--I suppose because she was childless.

What was anomalous in my position had passed away with the next outward mail. Veronica wrote to me; Ralph to his attorney and the Macdonalds. But by that time Mrs. Mac. had darned my socks ten times.

The surrounding gentry, the large resident landowners, of whom there remained a sprinkling in the Vale, were at first inclined to make much of me. There was Mrs. Topnambo, a withered, very dried-up personage, who affected pink trimmings; she gave the ton to the countryside as far as ton could be given to a society that rioted with hospitality. She made efforts to draw me out of the Macdonald environment, to make me differentiate myself, because I was the grandson of an earl. But the Topnambos were the great Loyalists of the place, and the Macdonalds the principal Separationists, and I stuck to the Macdonalds. I was searching for romance, you see, and could find none in Mrs. Topnambo's white figure, with its dryish, gray skin, and pink patches round the neck, that lay forever in dark or darkened rooms, and talked querulously of "Your uncle, the earl," whom I had never seen. I didn't get on with the men any better. They were either very dried up and querulous, too, or else very liquorish or boisterous in an incomprehensible way. Their evenings seemed to be a constant succession of shouts of laughter, merging into undignified staggers of white trousers through blue nights--round the corners of ragged huts. I never understood the hidden sources of their humour, and I had not money enough to mix well with their lavishness. I was too proud to be indebted to them, too. They didn't even acknowledge me on the road at last; they called me poor-spirited, a thin-blooded nobleman's cub--a Separationist traitor--and left me to superintend niggers and save money. Mrs. Mac, good Separationist though she was, as became the wife of her husband, had the word "home" forever on her lips. She had once visited the Rooksbys at Horton; she had treasured up a host of tiny things, parts of my forgotten boyhood, and she talked of them and talked of them until that past seemed a wholly desirable time, and the present a dull thing!

Journeying in search of romance--and that, after all, is our business in this world--is much like trying to eaten the horizon. It lies a little distance before us, and a little distance behind--about as far as the eye can carry. One, discovers that one has passed through it just as one passed what is to-day our horizon--One looks back and says. "Why there it is." One looks forward and says the same. It lies either in the old days when we used to, or in the new days when we shall. I look back upon those days of mine, and little things remain, come back to me, assume an atmosphere, take significance, go to the making of a temps jadis. Probably, when I look back upon what is the dull, arid waste of to-day, it will be much the same.

I could almost wish to take again one of the long, uninteresting night rides from the Vale to Spanish Town, or to listen once more to one of old Macdonald's interminable harangues on the folly of Mr. Canning's policy, or the virtues of Scotch thrift. "Jack, lad," he used to bellow in his curious squeak of a voice, "a gentleman you may be of guid Scots blood. But ye're a puir body's son for a' that."

He was set on my making money and turning honest pennies. I think he really liked me.

It was with that idea that he introduced me to Ramon, "an esteemed Spanish merchant of Kingston and Spanish Town." Ramon had seemed mysterious when I had seen him in company with Carlos and Castro but re-introduced in the homely atmosphere of the Macdonalds, he had become merely a saturnine, tall, dusky-featured, gold-spectacled Spaniard, and very good company. I learnt nearly all my Spanish from him. The only mystery about him was the extravagantly cheap rate at which he sold his things under the flagstaff in front of Admiral Rowley's house, the King's House, as it was called. The admiral himself was said to have extensive dealings with Ramon; he had at least the reputation of desiring to turn an honest penny, like myself. At any rate, everyone, from the proudest planters to the editor of the Buckatoro Journal next door, was glad of a chat with Ramon, whose knowledge of an immense variety of things was as deep as a draw-well--and as placid.

I used to buy island produce through him, ship it to New Orleans, have it sold, and re-import parcels of "notions," making a double profit. He was always ready to help me, and as ready to talk, saying that he had an immense respect for my relations, the Riegos.

That was how, at the end of my second year in the island, I had come to talking to him. The stage should have brought a letter from Veronica, who was to have presented Rooksby with a son and heir, but it was unaccountably late. I had been twice to the coach office, and was making my way desultorily back to Ramon's. He was talking to the editor of the Buckatoro Journal--the man from next door--and to another who had, whilst I walked lazily across the blazing square, ridden furiously up to the steps of the arcade. The rider was talking to both of them with exaggerated gestures of his arms. He had ridden off, spurring, and the editor, a little, gleaming-eyed hunchback, had remained in the sunshine, talking excitedly to Ramon.

I knew him well, an amusing, queer, warped, Satanic member of society, who was a sort of nephew to the Macdonalds, and hand in glove with all the Scotch Separationists of the island. He had started an extraordinary, scandalous paper that, to avoid sequestration, changed its name and offices every few issues, and was said by Loyalists, like the Topnambos, to have an extremely bad influence.

He subsisted a good deal on the charity of people like the Macdonalds, and I used sometimes to catch sight of him at evenfall listening to Mrs. Macdonald; he would be sitting beside her hammock on the veranda, his head very much down on his breast, very much on one side, and his great hump portending over his little

white face, and ruffling up his ragged black hair. Mrs. Macdonald clacked all the scandal of the Vale, and the Buckatoro Journal got the benefit of it all, with adornments.

For the last month or so the Journal had been more than usually effective, and it was only because Rowley was preparing to confound his traducers by the boat attack on Rio Medio, that a warrant had not come against David. When I saw him talking to Ramon, I imagined that the rider must have brought news of a warrant, and that David was preparing for flight. He hopped nimbly from Ramon's steps into the obscurity of his own door. Ramon turned his spectacles softly upon me.

"There you have it," he said. "The folly; the folly! To send only little boats to attack such a nest of villains. It is inconceivable."

The horseman had brought news that the boats of Rowley's squadron had been beaten off with great loss, in their attack on Rio Medio.

Ramon went on with an air of immense superiority, "And all the while we merchants are losing thousands."

His dark eyes searched my face, and it came disagreeably into my head that he was playing some part; that his talk was delusive, his anger feigned; that, perhaps, he still suspected me of being a Separationist. He went on talking about the failure of the boat attack. All Jamaica had been talking of it, speculating about it, congratulating itself on it. British valour was going to tell; four boats' crews would do the trick. And now the boats had been beaten off, the crews captured, half the men killed! Already there was panic on the island. I could see men coming together in little knots, talking eagerly. I didn't like to listen to Ramon, to a Spaniard talking in that way about the defeat of my countrymen by his. I walked across the King's Square, and the stage driving up just then, I went to the office, and got my correspondence.

Veronica's letter came like a faint echo, like the sound of very distant surf, heard at night; it seemed impossible that any one could be as interested as she in the things that were happening over there. She had had a son; one of Ralph's aunts was its godmother. She and Ralph had been to Bath last spring; the country wanted water very badly. Ralph had used his influence, had explained matters to a very great personage, had spent a little money on the injured runners. In the meanwhile I had nearly forgotten the whole matter; it seemed to be extraordinary that they should still be interested in it.

I was to come back; as soon as it was safe I was to come back; that was the main tenor of the letter.

I read it in a little house of call, in a whitewashed room that contained a cardboard cat labelled "The Best," for sole ornament. Four swarthy fellows, Mexican patriots, were talking noisily about their War of Independence, and the exploits of a General Trapelascis, who had been defeating the Spanish troops over there. It was almost impossible to connect them with a world that included Veronica's delicate handwriting with the pencil lines erased at the base of each line of ink. They seemed to be infinitely more real. Even Veronica's interest in me seemed a little strange; her desire for my return irritated me. It was as if she had asked me to return to a state of bondage, after having found myself. Thinking of it made me suddenly aware that I had become a man, with a man's aims, and a disillusionized view of life. It suddenly appeared very wonderful that I could sit calmly there, surveying, for instance, those four sinister fellows with daggers, as if they were nothing at all. When I had been at home the matter would have caused me extraordinary emotions, as many as if I had seen an elephant in a travelling show. As for going back to my old life, it didn't seem to be possible.