

PART THIRD -- CASA RIEGO

CHAPTER ONE

All this is in my mind now, softened by distance, by the tenderness of things remembered--the wonderful dawn of life, with all the mystery and promise of the young day breaking amongst heavy thunder-clouds. At the time I was overwhelmed--I can't express it otherwise. I felt like a man thrown out to sink or swim, trying to keep his head above water. Of course, I did not suspect Carlos now; I was ashamed of ever having done so. I had long ago forgiven him his methods. "In a great need, you must," he had said, looking at me anxiously, "recur to desperate remedies." And he was going to die. I had made no answer, and only hung my head--not in resentment, but in doubt of my strength to bear the burden of the great trust that this man whom I loved for his gayety, his recklessness and romance, was going to leave in my inexperienced hands.

He had talked till, at last exhausted, he sank back gently on the pillows of the enormous bed emblazoned like a monument. I went out, following a gray-headed negro, and the nun glided in, and stood at the foot with her white hands folded patiently.

"Señor!" I heard her mutter reproachfully to the invalid.

"Do not scold a poor sinner, Dona Maria," he addressed her feebly, with valiant jocularly. "The days are not many now."

The strangeness and tremendousness of what was happening came over me very strongly whilst, in a large chamber with barred loopholes, I was throwing off the rags in which I had entered this house. The night had come already, and I was putting on some of Carlos' clothes by the many flames of candles burning in a tall bronze candelabrum, whose three legs figured the paws of a lion. And never, since I had gone on the road to wait for the smugglers, and been choked by the Bow Street runners, had I remembered so well the house in which I was born. It was as if, till then, I had never felt the need to look back. But now, like something romantic and glamorous, there came before me Veronica's sweet, dim face, my mother's severe and resolute countenance. I had need of all her resoluteness now. And I remembered the figure of my father in the big chair by the ingle, powerless and lost in his search for rhymes. He might have understood the romance of my

situation.

It grew upon me as I thought. Don Balthasar, I understood, was apprised of my arrival. As in a dream, I followed the old negro, who had returned to the door of my room. It grew upon me in the silence of this colonnaded court. We walked along the upper gallery; his cane tapped before me on the tessellated pavement; below, the water splashed in the marble basins; glass lanthorns hung glimmering between the pillars and, in wrought silver frames, lighted the broad white staircase. Under the inner curve of the vaulted gateway a black-faced man on guard, with a bell-mouthed gun, rose from a stool at our passing. I thought I saw Castro's peaked hat and large cloak flit in the gloom into which fell the light from the small doorway of a sort of guardroom near the closed gate. We continued along the arcaded walk; a double curtain was drawn to right and left before me, while my guide stepped aside.

In a vast white apartment three black figures stood about a central glitter of crystal and silver. At once the aged, slightly mechanical voice of Don Balthasar rose thinly, putting himself and his house at my disposition.

The formality of movements, of voices, governed and checked the unbounded emotions of my wonder. The two ladies sank, with a rustle of starch and stiff silks, in answer to my profound bow. I had just enough control over myself to accomplish that, but mentally I was out of breath; and when I felt the slight, trembling touch of Don Balthasar's hand resting on my inclined head, it was as if I had suddenly become aware for a moment of the earth's motion. The hand was gone; his face was averted, and a corpulent priest, all straight and black below his rosy round face, had stepped forward to say a Latin grace in solemn tones that wheezed a little. As soon as he had done he withdrew with a circular bow to the ladies, to Don Balthasar, who inclined his silvery head. His lifeless voice propounded:

"Our excellent Father Antonio, in his devotion, dines by the bedside of our beloved Carlos." He sighed. The heavy carvings of his chair rose upright at his back; he sat with his head leaning forward over his silver plate. A heavy silence fell. Death hovered over that table--and also, as it were, the breath of past ages. The multitude of lights, the polished floor of costly wood, the bare whiteness of walls wainscotted with marble, the vastness of the room, the imposing forms of furniture, carved heavily in ebony, impressed me with a sense of secular and austere magnificence. For centuries there had always been a Riego living in this fortress-like palace, ruling this portion of the New World with the whole majesty of his race. And I thought of the long, loop-holed, buttressed walls that this abode of noble adventurers presented foursquare to the night outside, standing there by the seashore like a tomb of warlike glories. They built their houses thus,

centuries ago, when the bands of buccaneers, indomitable and atrocious, had haunted their conquest with a reminder of mortality and weakness.

It was a tremendous thing for me, this dinner. The portly duenna on my left had a round eye and an irritated, parrot-like profile, crowned by a high comb, a head shaded by black lace. I dared hardly lift my eyes to the dark and radiant presence facing me across a table furniture that was like a display of treasure.

But I did look. She was the girl of the lizard, the girl of the dagger, and, in the solemnity of the silence, she was like a fabulous apparition from a half-forgotten tale. I watched covertly the youthful grace of her features. The curve of her cheek filled me with delight. From time to time she shook the heavy clusters of her curls, and I was amazed, as though I had never before seen a woman's hair. Each parting of her lips was a distinct anticipation of a great felicity; when she said a few words to me, I felt an inward trembling. They were indifferent words.

Had she forgotten she was the girl with the dagger? And the old Don? What did that old man know? What did he think? What did he mean by that touch of a blessing on my head? Did he know how I had come to his house? But every turn of her head troubled my thoughts. The movements of her hands made me forget myself. The gravity of her eyes above the smile of her lips suggested ideas of adoration.

We were served noiselessly. A battalion of young lusty negroes, in blue jackets laced with silver, walked about barefooted under the command of the old major-domo. He, alone, had white silk stockings, and shoes with silver buckles; his wide-skirted maroon velvet coat, with gold on the collar and cuffs, hung low about his thin shanks; and, with a long ebony staff in his hand, he directed the service from behind Don Balthasar's chair. At times he bent towards his master's ear. Don Balthasar answered with a murmur: and those two faces brought close together, one like a noble ivory carving, the other black with the mute pathos of the African faces, seemed to commune in a fellowship of age, of things far off, remembered, lived through together. There was something mysterious and touching in this violent contrast, toned down by the near approach to the tomb--the brotherhood of master and slave.

At a given moment an enormous iron key was brought in on a silver salver, and, bending over the chair, the gray-headed negro laid it by Don Balthasar's plate.

"Don Carlos' orders," he muttered.

The old Don seemed to wake up; a little colour mounted to his cheeks.

"There was a time, young caballero, when the gates of Casa Riego stood open night and day to the griefs and poverty of the people, like the doors of a church--and as respected. But now it seems . . ."

He mumbled a little peevishly, but seemed to recollect himself. "The safety of his guest is like the breath of life to a Castilian," he ended, with a benignant but attentive look at me.

He rose, and we passed out through the double lines of the servants ranged from table to door. By the splash of the fountain, on a little round table between two chairs, stood a many-branched candlestick. The duenna sat down opposite Don Balthasar. A multitude of stars was suspended over the breathless peace of the court.

"Señorita," I began, mustering all my courage, and all my Spanish, "I do not know-----"

She was walking by my side with upright carriage and a nonchalant step, and shut her fan smartly.

"Don Carlos himself had given me the dagger," she said rapidly.

The fan flew open; a touch of the wind fanning her person came faintly upon my cheek with a suggestion of delicate perfume.

She noticed my confusion, and said, "Let us walk to the end, Señor."

The old man and the duenna had cards in their hands now. The intimate tone of her words ravished me into the seventh heaven.

"Ah," she said, when we were out of ear-shot, "I have the spirit of my house; but I am only a weak girl. We have taken this resolution because of your hidal-guidad, because you are our kinsman, because you are English. Ay de mi! Would I had been a man. My father needs a son in his great, great age. Poor father! Poor Don Carlos!"

There was the catch of a sob in the shadow of the end gallery. We turned back, and the undulation of her walk seemed to throw me into a state of exaltation.

"On the word of an Englishman-----" I began.

The fan touched my arm. The eyes of the duenna glittered over the cards.

"This woman belongs to that man, too," muttered Seraphina. "And yet she used to be faithful--almost a mother. Misericordia! Señor, there is no one in this unhappy place that he has not bought, corrupted, frightened, or bent to his will--to his madness of hate against England. Of our poor he has made a rabble. The bishop himself is afraid."

Such was the beginning of our first conversation in this court suggesting the cloistered peace of a convent. We strolled to and fro; she dropped her eyelids, and the agitation of her mind, pictured in the almost fierce swiftness of her utterance, made a wonderful contrast to the leisurely rhythm of her movements, marked by the slow beating of the fan. The retirement of her father from the world after her mother's death had made a great solitude round his declining years. Yes, that sorrow, and the base intrigues of that man--a fugitive, a hanger-on of her mother's family--recommended to Don Balthasar's grace by her mother's favour. Yes! He had, before she died, thrown his baneful influence even upon that saintly spirit, by the piety of his practices and these sufferings for his faith he always paraded. His faith! Oh, hypocrite, hypocrite, hypocrite! His only faith was hate--the hate of England. He would sacrifice everything to it. He would despoil and ruin his greatest benefactors, this fatal man!

"Señor, my cousin," she said picturesquely, "he would, if he could, drop poison into every spring of clear water in your country. . . . Smile, Don Juan."

Her repressed vehemence had held me spellbound, and the silvery little burst of laughter ending her fierce tirade had the bewildering effect of a crash on my mind. The other two looked up from their cards.

"I pretend to laugh to deceive that woman," she explained quickly. "I used to love her."

She had no one now about her she could trust or love. It was as if the whole world were blind to the nefarious nature of that man. He had possessed himself of her little father's mind. I glanced towards the old Don, who at that moment was brokenly taking a pinch of snuff out of a gold snuff-box, while the duenna, very sallow and upright, waited, frowning loftily at her cards.

"It seemed as if nothing could restrain that man," Seraphina's voice went on by my side, "neither fear nor gratitude." He seemed to cast a spell upon people. He was the plenipotentiary of a powerful religious order--no matter. Don Carlos knew these things better than she did. He had the ear of the Captain-General through that. "Sh! But the intrigues, the intrigues!" I saw her little hand clenched on the closed fan. There were no bounds to his audacity. He wasted their wealth. "The audacity!" He had overawed her father's mind; he claimed descent from his Irish

kings, he who----- "Señor, my English cousin, he even dares aspire to my person."

The game of cards was over.

"Death rather," she let fall in a whisper of calm resolution.

She dropped me a deep curtsey. Servants were ranging themselves in a row, holding upright before their black faces wax lights in tall silver candlesticks inherited from the second Viceroy of Mexico. I bowed profoundly, with indignation on her behalf and horror in my breast; and, turning away from me, she sank low, bending her head to receive her father's blessing. The major-domo preceded the cortège. The two women moved away with an ample rustling of silk, and with lights carried on each side of their black, stiff figures. Before they had disappeared up the wide staircase, Don Balthasar, who had stood perfectly motionless with his old face over his snuff-box, seemed to wake up, and made in the air a hasty sign of the cross after his daughter.

They appeared again in the upper gallery between the columns. I saw her head, draped in lace, carried proudly, with the white flower in her hair. I raised my eyes. All my being seemed to strive upwards in that glance. Had she turned her face my way just a little? Illusion! And the double door above closed with an echoing sound along the empty galleries. She had disappeared.

Don Balthasar took three turns in the courtyard, no more. It was evidently a daily custom. When he withdrew his hand from my arm to tap his snuff-box, we stood still till he was ready to slip it in again. This was the strangest part of it, the most touching, the most startling--that he should lean like this on me, as if he had done it for years. Before me there must have been somebody else. Carlos? Carlos, no doubt. And in this placing me in that position there was apparent the work of death, the work of life, of time, the pathetic realization of an inevitable destiny. He talked a little disjointedly, with the uncertain swaying of a shadow on his thoughts, as if the light of his mind had flickered like an expiring lamp. I remember that once he asked me, in a sort of senile worry, whether I had ever heard of an Irish king called Brian Boru; but he did not seem to attach any importance to my reply, and spoke no more till he said good-night at the door of my chamber.

He went on to his apartment, surrounded by lights and preceded by his major-domo, who walked as bowed with age as himself; but the African had a firmer step.

I watched him go; there was about his progress in state something ghostlike and

royal, an old-time, decayed majesty. It was as if he had arisen before me after a hundred years' sleep in his retreat--that man who, in his wild and passionate youth, had endangered the wealth of the Riegos, had been the idol of the Madrid populace, and a source of dismay to his family. He had carried away, *vi et armis*, a nun from a convent, incurring the enmity of the Church and the displeasure of his sovereign. He had sacrificed all his fortune in Europe to the service of his king, had fought against the French, had a price put upon his head by a special proclamation. He had known passion, power, war, exile, and love. He had been thanked by his returned king, honoured for his wisdom, and crushed with sorrow by the death of his young wife--Seraphina's mother.

What a life! And what was my arm--my arm on which he had leaned in his decay? I looked at it with a sort of surprise, dubiously. What was expected of it? I asked myself. Would it have the strength? Ah, let her only lean on it!

It seemed to me that I would have the power to shake down heavy pillars of stone, like Samson, in her service; to reach up and take the stars, one by one, to lay at her feet. I heard a sigh. A shadow appeared in the gallery.

The door of my room was open. Leaning my back against the balustrade, I saw the black figure of the Father Antonio, muttering over his breviary, enter the space of the light.

He crossed himself, and stopped with a friendly, "You are taking the air, my son. The night is warm." He was rubicund, and his little eyes looked me over with priestly mansuetude.

I said it was warm indeed. I liked him instinctively.

He lifted his eyes to the starry sky. "The orbs are shining excessively," he said; then added, "To the greater glory of God. One is never tired of contemplating this sublime spectacle."

"How is Don Carlos, your reverence?" I asked.

"My beloved penitent sleeps," he answered, peering at me benevolently; "he reposes. Do you know, young caballero, that I have been a prisoner of war in your country, and am acquainted with Londres? I was chaplain of the ship San José at the battle of Trafalgar. On my soul, it is, indeed, a blessed, fertile country, full of beauty and of well-disposed hearts. I have never failed since to say every day an especial prayer for its return to our holy mother, the Church. Because I love it."

I said nothing to this, only bowing; and he laid a short, thick hand on my

shoulder.

"May your coming amongst us, my son, bring calmness to a Christian soul too much troubled with the affairs of this world." He sighed, nodded to me with a friendly, sad smile, and began to mutter his prayers as he went.