

CHAPTER TWO

Don Balthasar accepted my presence without a question. Perhaps he fancied he had invited me; of my manner of coming he was ignorant, of course. O'Brien, who had gone on to Havana in the ship which had landed the Riegos in Rio Medio, gave no sign of life. And yet, on the arrival of the Breeze, he must have found out I was no longer on board. I forgot the danger suspended over my head. For a fortnight I lived as if in a dream.

"What is the action you want me to take, Carlos?"

I asked one day.

Propped up with pillows, he looked at me with the big eyes of his emaciation.

"I would like best to see you marry my cousin. Once before a woman of our race had married an Englishman. She had been happy. English things last forever--English peace, English power, English fidelity. It is a country of much serenity, of order, of stable affection. . . ."

His voice was very weak and full of faith. I remained silent, overwhelmed at this secret of my innermost heart, voiced by his bloodless lips--as if a dream had come to pass, as if a miracle had taken place. He added, with an indefinable smile of an almost unearthly wistfulness:

"I would have married your sister, my Juan."

He had on him the glamour of things English--of English power emerging from the dust of wars and revolution; of England stable and undismayed, like a strong man who had kept his feet in the tottering of secular edifices shaken to their foundations by an earthquake. It was as if for him that were something fine, something romantic, just as for me romance had always seemed to be embodied in his features, in his glance, and to live in the air he breathed. On the other side of the bed the old Don, lost in a high-backed armchair, remained plunged in that meditation of the old which resembles sleep, as sleep resembles death. The priest, lighted up by the narrow, bright streak of the window, was reading his breviary through a pair of enormous spectacles. The white coif of the nun hovered in distant corners of the room.

We were constantly talking of O'Brien. He was the only subject of all our conversations; and when Carlos inveighed against the Intendente, the old Don

nodded sadly in his chair. He was dishonouring the name of the Riegos, Carlos would exclaim feebly, turning his head towards his uncle. His uncle's own province, the name of his own town, stood for a refuge of the scum of the Antilles. It was a shameful sanctuary. Every ruffian, rascal, murderer, and thief of the West Indies had come to think of this ancient and honourable town as a safe haven.

I myself could very well remember the Jamaica household expression, "The Rio Medio piracies," and all these paragraphs in the home papers that reached us a month old headed, "The Activity of the So-called Mexican Privateers," and urging upon our Government the necessity of energetic remonstrances in Madrid. "The fact, incredible as it may appear," said the writers, "seeming to be that the nest of these Picaroons is actually within the loyal dominions of the Spanish Crown." If Spain, our press said, resented our recognition of South American independence, let it do so openly, not by countenancing criminals. It was unworthy of a great nation. "Our West Indian trade is being stabbed in the back," declaimed the Bristol Mirror. "Where is our fleet?" it asked. "If the Cuban authorities are unable or unwilling, let us take the matter in our own hands."

There was a great deal of mystery about this peculiar outbreak of lawlessness that seemed to be directed so pointedly against the British trade. The town of Rio Medio was alluded to as one of the unapproachable towns of the earth--closed, like the capital of Prester John to the travellers, or Mecca to the infidels. Nobody I ever met in Jamaica had set eyes on the place. The impression prevailed that no stranger could come out of it alive. Incredible stories were told of it in the island, and indignation at its existence grew at home and in the colonies.

Admiral Rowley, an old fighter, grown a bit lazy, no diplomatist (the stories of his being venal, I take it, were simply abominable calumnies), unable to get anything out of the Cuban authorities but promises and lofty protestations, had made up his mind, under direct pressure from home, to take matters into his own hands. His boat attack had been a half-and-half affair, for all that. He intended, he had said, to go to the bottom of the thing, and find out what there was in the place; but he could not believe that anybody would dare offer resistance to the boats of an English squadron. They were sent in as if for an exploration rather than for an armed landing.

It ended in a disaster, and a sense of wonder had been added to the mystery of the fabulous Rio Medio organization. The Cuban authorities protested against the warlike operations attempted in a friendly country; at the same time, they had delivered the seven pirates--the men whom I saw hanged in Kingston. And Rowley was recalled home in disgrace.

It was my extraordinary fate to penetrate into this holy city of the last organized piracy the world would ever know. I beheld it with my eyes; I had stood on the point behind the very battery of guns which had swept Rowley's boats out of existence.

The narrow entrance faced, across the water, the great portal of the cathedral. Rio Medio had been a place of some splendour in its time. The ruinous heavy buildings clung to the hillsides, and my eyes plunged into a broad vista of an empty and magnificent street. Behind many of the imposing and escutcheoned frontages there was nothing but heaps of rubble; the footsteps of rare passers-by woke lonely echoes, and strips of grass outlined in parallelograms the flagstones of the roadway. The Casa Riego raised its buttressed and loop-holed bulk near the shore, resembling a defensive outwork; on my other hand the shallow bay, vast, placid, and shining, extended itself behind the strip of coast like an enormous lagoon. The fronds of palm-clusters dotted the beach over the glassy shimmer of the far distance. The dark and wooded slopes of the hills closed the view inland on every side.

Under the palms the green masses of vegetation concealed the hovels of the rabble. There were three so-called 'villages' at the bottom of the bay; and that good Catholic and terrible man, Señor Juez O'Brien, could with a simple nod send every man in them to the gallows.

The respectable population of Rio Medio, leading a cloistered existence in the ruins of old splendour, used to call that thievish rabble *Lugarenos*--villagers. They were sea-thieves, but they were dangerous. At night, from these clusters of hovels surrounded by the banana plantations, there issued a villainous noise, the humming of hived scoundrels. Lights twinkled. One could hear the thin twanging of guitars, uproarious songs, all the sounds of their drinking, singing, gambling, quarrelling, love-making, squalor. Sometimes the long shriek of a woman rent the air, or shouting tumults rose and subsided; while, on the other side of the cathedral, the houses of the past, the houses without life, showed no light and made no sound.

There would be no strollers on the beach in the daytime; the masts of the two schooners (bought in the United States by O'Brien to make war with on the British Empire) appeared like slender sticks far away up the empty stretch of water; and that gathering of ruffians, thieves, murderers, and runaway slaves slept in their noisome dens. Their habits were obscene and nocturnal. Cruel without hardihood, and greedy without courage, they were no skull-and-crossbones pirates of the old kind, that, under the black flag, neither gave nor expected quarter. Their usual practice was to hang in rowboats round some unfortunate ship becalmed in sight of their coast, like a troop of vultures hopping

about the carcass of a dead buffalo on a plain. When they judged the thing was fairly safe, they would attack with a great noise and show of ferocity; do some hasty looting amongst the cargo; break into the cabins for watches, wearing apparel, and so on; perpetrate at times some atrocity, such as singeing the soles of some poor devil of a ship-master, when they had positive information (from such affiliated helpers as Ramon, the storekeeper in Jamaica) that there was coined money concealed on board; and take themselves off to their sordid revels on shore, and to hold auctions of looted property on the beach. These Were attended by people from the interior of the province, and now and then even the Havana dealers would come on the quiet to secure a few pieces of silk or a cask or two of French wine. Tomas Castro could not mention them without spitting in sign of contempt. And it was with that base crew that O'Brien imagined himself to be making war on the British Empire!

In the time of Nichols it did look as if they were really becoming enterprising. They had actually chased and boarded ships sixty miles out at sea. It seems he had inspired them with audacity by means of kicks, blows, and threats of instant death, after the manner of Bluenose sailors. His long limbs, the cadaverous and menacing aspect, the strange nasal ferocity of tone, something mocking and desperate in his aspect, had persuaded them that this unique sort of heretic was literally in league with the devil. He had been the most efficient of the successive leaders O'Brien had imported to give some sort of effect to his warlike operations. I laugh and wonder as I write these words; but the man did look upon it as a war and nothing else. What he had had the audacity to propose to me had been treason, not thieving. It had a glamour for him which, he supposed, a Separationist (as I had the reputation of being) could not fail to see. He was thinking of enlarging his activity, of getting really in touch with the Mexican Junta of rebels. As he had said, he needed a gentleman now. These were Carlos' surmises.

Before Nichols there had been a rather bloodthirsty Frenchman, but he got himself stabbed in an aguardiente shop for blaspheming the Virgin. Nichols, as far as I could understand, had really grown scared at O'Brien's success in repulsing Rowley's boats; he had mysteriously disappeared, and neither of the two schooners had been out till the day of my kidnapping, when Castro, by order of Carlos, had taken the command. The freebooters of Rio Medio had returned to their cautious and petty pilfering in boats, from such unlucky ships as the chance of the weather had delivered into their hands. I heard, also, during my walks with Castro (he attended me wrapped in his cloak, and with two pistols in his belt), that there were great jealousies and bickerings amongst that base populace. They were divided into two parties. For instance, the rascals living in the easternmost village accepted tacitly the leadership of a certain Domingo, a mulatto, keeper of a vile grogshop, who was skilled in the art of throwing a knife

to a great distance. Man-uel-del-Popolo, the extraordinary improvisador with the guitar, was an aspirant for power with a certain following of his own. Words could not express Castro's scorn for these fellows. Ladrones! vermin of the earth, scum of the sea, he called them.

His position, of course, was exceptional. A dependent of the Riegos, a familiar of the Casa, he was infinitely removed from a Domingo or a Manuel. He lived soberly, like a Spaniard, in some hut in the nearest of the villages, with an old woman who swept the earth floor and cooked his food at an outside fire--his puchero and tortillas--and rolled for him his provision of cigarettes for the day. Every morning he marched up to the Casa, like a courtier, to attend on his king. I never saw him eat or drink anything there. He leaned a shoulder against the wall, or sat on the floor of the gallery with his short legs stretched out near the big mahogany door of Carlos' room, with many cigarettes stuck behind his ears and in the band of his hat. When these were gone he grubbed for more in the depths of his clothing, somewhere near his skin. Puffs of smoke issued from his pursed lips; and the desolation of his pose, the sorrow of his round, wrinkled face, was so great that it seemed were he to cease smoking, he would die of grief.

The general effect of the place was of vitality exhausted, of a body calcined, of romance turned into stone. The still air, the hot sunshine, the white beach curving around the deserted sheet of water, the sombre green of the hills, had the motionlessness of things petrified, the vividness of things painted, the sadness of things abandoned, desecrated. And, as if alone intrusted with the guardianship of life's sacred fire, I was moving amongst them, nursing my love for Sera-phina. The words of Carlos were like oil upon a flame; it enveloped me from head to foot with a leap. I had the physical sensation of breathing it, of seeing it, of being at the same time driven on and restrained. One moment I strode blindly over the sand, the next I stood still; and Castro, coming up panting, would remark from behind that, on such a hot day as this, it was a shame to disturb even a dog sleeping in the shade. I had the feeling of absolute absorption into one idea. I was ravaged by a thought. It was as if I had never before imagined, heard spoken of, or seen a woman.

It was true. She was a revelation to my eye and my ear, as much as to my heart and mind. Indeed, I seemed never before to have seen a woman. Whom had I seen? Veronica? We had been too poor, and my mother too proud, to keep up a social intercourse with our neighbours; the village girls had been devoid of even the most rustic kind of charm; the people were too poor to be handsome. I had never been tempted to look at a woman's face; and the manner of my going from home is known. In Jamaica, sharing with an exaggerated loyalty the unpopularity of the Mac-donalds, I had led a lonely life; for I had no taste for their friends' society, and the others, after a time, would have nothing to do with me. I had

made a sort of hermitage for myself out of a house in a distant plantation, and sometimes I would see no white face for whole weeks together. She was the first woman to me--a strange new being, a marvel as great as Eve herself to Adam's wondering awakening.

It may be that a close intimacy stands in the way of love springing up between two young people, but in our case it was different. My passion seemed to spring from our understanding, because the understanding was in the face of danger. We were like two people in a slowly sinking ship; the feeling of the abyss under our feet was our bond, not the real comprehension of each other. Apart from that, she remained to me always unattainable and romantic?--unique, with all the unexpressed promises of love such as no world had ever known. And naturally, because for me, hitherto, the world had held no woman. She was an apparition of dreams--the girl with the lizard, the girl with the dagger, a wonder to stretch out my hands to from afar; and yet I was permitted to whisper intimately to this my dream, to this vision. We had to put our heads close together, talking of the enemy and of the shadow over the house; while under our eyes Carlos waited for death, made cruel by his anxieties, and the old Don walked in the darkness of his accumulated years.

As to me, what was I to her?

Carlos, in a weak voice, and holding her hand with a feeble and tenacious grasp, had told her repeatedly that the English cousin was ready to offer up his life to her happiness in this world. Many a time she would turn her glance upon me--not a grateful glance, but, as it were, searching and pensive--a glance of penetrating candour, a young girl's glance, that, by its very trustfulness, seems to look one through and through.

And then the sense of my unworthiness made me long for her love as a sinner, in his weakness, longs for the saving grace.

"Our English cousin is worthy of his great nation. He is very brave, and very chivalrous to a poor girl," she would say softly.

One day, I remember, going out of Carlos' room, she had just paused on the threshold for an almost imperceptible moment, the time to murmur, with feeling, "May Heaven reward you, Don Juan." This sound, faint and enchanting, like a breath of sweet wind, staggered me. Castro, sitting outside as usual, had scrambled to his feet and stood by, hat in hand, his head bent slightly with saturnine deference. She smiled at him. I think she felt kindly towards the tubby little bandit of a fellow. After all, there was something touching and pathetic in his mournful vigil at the door of our radiant Carlos. I could have embraced that

figure of grotesque and truculent devotion. Had she not smiled upon him?

The rest of that memorable day I spent in a state of delightful distraction, as if I had been ravished into the seventh heaven, and feared to be cast out again presently, as my unworthiness deserved. What if it were possible, after all?--this, what Carlos wished, what he had said. The heavens shook; the constellations above the court of Casa Riego trembled at the thought.

Carlos fought valiantly. There were days when his courage seemed to drive the grim presence out of the chamber, where Father Antonio with his breviary, and the white coif of the nun, seemed the only reminders of illness and mortality. Sometimes his voice was very strong, and a sort of hopefulness lighted his wasted features. Don Balthasar paid many visits to his nephew in the course of each day. He sat apparently attentive, and nodding at the name of O'Brien. Then Carlos would talk against O'Brien from amongst his pillows as if inspired, till the old man, striking the floor with his gold-headed cane, would exclaim, in a quavering voice, that he, alone, had made him, had raised him up from the dust, and could abase him to the dust again. He would instantly go to Havana; orders would be given to Cesar for the journey this very moment. He would then take a pinch of snuff with shaky energy, and lean back in the armchair. Carlos would whisper to me, "He will never leave the Casa again," and an air of solemn, brooding helplessness would fall upon the funereal magnificence of the room. Presently we would hear the old Don muttering dotingly to himself the name of Seraphina's mother, the young wife of his old days, so saintly, and snatched away from him in punishment of his early sinfulness. It was impossible that she should have been deceived in Don Patricio (O'Brien's Christian name was Patrick). The intendente was a man of great intelligence, and full of reverence for her memory. Don Balthasar admitted that he himself was growing old; and, besides, there was that sorrow of his life. . . . He had been fortunate in his affliction to have a man of his worth by his side. There might have been slight irregularities, faults of youth (O'Brien was five-and-forty if a day). The archbishop himself was edified by the life of the upright judge--all Havana, all the island. The intendente's great zeal for the House might have led him into an indiscretion or two. So many years now, so many years. A noble himself. Had we heard of an Irish king? A king . . . king... he could not recall the name at present. It might be well to hear what a man of such abilities had to say for himself.

Carlos and I looked at each other silently. "And his life hangs on a thread," whispered the dying man with something like despair.

The crisis of all these years of plotting would come the moment the old Don closed his eyes. Meantime, why was it that O'Brien did not show himself in Rio Medio? What was it that kept him in Havana?

"Already I do not count, my Juan," Carlos would say. "And he prepares all things for the day of my uncle's death."

The dark ways of that man were inscrutable. He must have known, of course, that I was in Rio Medio. His presence was to be feared, and his absence itself was growing formidable.

"But what do you think he will do? How do you think he will act?" I would ask, a little bewildered by my responsibility.

Carlos could not tell precisely. It was not till some time after his arrival from Europe that he became clearly aware of all the extent of that man's ambition. At the same time, he had realized all his power. That man aimed at nothing less than the whole Riego fortune, and, of course, through Seraphina. I would feel a rage at this--a sort of rage that made my head spin as if the ground had reeled. "He would have found means of getting rid of me if he had not seen I was not long for this world," Carlos would say. He had gained an unlimited ascendancy over his uncle's mind; he had made a solitude round this solemn dotage in which ended so much power, a great reputation, a stormy life of romance and passion--so picturesque and excessive even in his old man's love, whose after-effect, as though the work of a Nemesis resenting so much brilliance, was casting a shadow upon the fate of his daughter.

Small, fair, plump, concealing his Irish vivacity of intelligence under the taciturn gravity of a Spanish lawyer, and backed by the influence of two noble houses, O'Brien had attained to a remarkable reputation of sagacity and unstained honesty. Hand in glove with the clergy, one of the judges of the Marine Court, procurator to the cathedral chapter, he had known how to make himself so necessary to the highest in the land that everybody but the very highest looked upon him with fear. His occult influence was altogether out of proportion to his official position. His plans were carried out with an unswerving tenacity of purpose. Carlos believed him capable of anything but a vulgar peculation. He had been reduced to observe his action quietly, hampered by the weakness of ill-health. As an instance of O'Brien's methods, he related to me the manner in which, faithful to his purpose of making a solitude about the Riegos, he had contrived to prevent overtures for an alliance from the Salazar family. The young man Don Vincente himself was impossible, an evil liver, Carlos said, of dissolute habits. Still, to have even that shadow of a rival out of the way, O'Brien took advantage of a sanguinary affray between that man and one of his boon companions about some famous guitar-player girl. The encounter having taken place under the wall of a convent, O'Brien had contrived to keep Don Vincente in prison ever since--not on a charge of murder (which for a young man of that

quality would have been a comparatively venial offence), but of sacrilege. The Salazars were a powerful family, but he was strong enough to risk their enmity. "Imagine that, Juan!" Carlos would exclaim, closing his eyes. What had caused him the greatest uneasiness was the knowledge that Don Balthasar had been induced lately to write some letter to the archbishop in Havana. Carlos was afraid it was simply an expression of affection and unbounded trust in his intendente, practically dictated to the old man by O'Brien. "Do you not see, Juan, how such a letter would strengthen his case, should he ask the guardians for Seraphina's hand?" And perhaps he was appointed one of the guardians himself. It was impossible to know what, were the testamentary dispositions; Father Antonio, who had learned many things in the confessional, could tell us nothing, but, when the matter was mentioned, only rolled his eyes up to heaven in an alarming manner. It was startling to think of all the unholy forces awakened by the temptation of Seraphina's helplessness and her immense fortune. Incorruptible himself, that man knew how to corrupt others. There might have been combined in one dark intrigue the covetousness of religious orders, the avarice of high officials--God knows what conspiracy--to help O'Brien's ambition, his passions. He could make himself necessary; he could bribe; he could frighten; he was able to make use of the highest in the land and of the lowest, from the present Captain-General to the Lugarenos. In Havana he had for him the reigning powers; in Rio Medio the lowest outcasts of the island.

This last was the most dangerous aspect of his power for us, and also his weakest point. This was the touch of something fanciful and imaginative; a certain grim childishness in the idea of making war on the British Empire; a certain disregard of risk; a bizarre illusion of his hate for the abhorred Saxon. That he risked his position by his connection with such a nest of scoundrels, there could be no doubt. It was he who had given them such organization as they had, and he stood between them and the law. But whatever might have been suspected of him, he was cautious enough not to go too far. He never appeared personally; his agents directed the action--men who came from Havana rather mysteriously. They were of all sorts; some of them were friars. But the rabble, who knew him really only as the intendente of the great man, stood in the greatest dread of him. Who was it procured the release of some of them who had got into trouble in Havana? The intendente. Who was it who caused six of their comrades, who had been taken up on a matter of street-brawling in the capital, to be delivered to the English as pirates? Again, the intendente, the terrible man, the Juez, who apparently had the power to pardon and condemn.

In this way he was most dangerous to us in Rio Medio. He had that rabble at his beck and call. He could produce a rising of cut-throats by lifting his little finger. He was not very likely to do that, however. He was intriguing in Havana--but how could we unmask him there? "He has cut us off from the world," Carlos would

say. "It is so, my Juan, that, if I tried to write, no letter of mine would reach its destination; it would fall into his hands. And if I did manage to make my voice heard, he would appeal to my uncle himself in his defence."

Besides, to whom could he write?--who would believe him? O'Brien would deny everything, and go on his way. He had been accepted too long, had served too many people and known so many secrets. It was terrible. And if I went myself to Havana, no one would believe me. But I should disappear; they would never see me again. It was impossible to unmask that man unless by a long and careful action. And for this he--Carlos--had no time; and I--I had no standing, no relations, no skill even....

"But what is my line of conduct, Carlos?" I insisted; while Father Antonio, from whom Carlos had, of course, no secrets, stood by the bed, his round, jolly face almost comical in its expression of compassionate concern.

Carlos passed his thin, wasted hand over a white brow pearly with the sweat of real anguish.

Carlos thought that while Don Balthasar lived, O'Brien would do nothing to compromise his influence over him. Neither could I take any action; I must wait and watch. O'Brien would, no doubt, try to remove me; but as long as I kept within the Casa, he thought I should be safe. He recommended me to try to please his cousin, and even found strength to smile at my transports. Don Balthasar liked me for the sake of his sister, who had been so happy in England. I was his kinsman and his guest. From first to last, England, the idea of my country, of my home, played a great part in my life then; it seemed to rest upon all our thoughts. To me it was but my boyhood, the farm at the foot of the downs--Rooksby's Manor--all within a small nook between the quarry by the side of the Canterbury road and the shingle beach, whose regular crashing under the feet of a smuggling band was the last sound of my country I had heard. For Carlos it was the concrete image of stability, with the romantic feeling of its peace and of Veronica's beauty; the unchangeable land where he had loved. To O'Brien's hate it loomed up immense and odious, like the form of a colossal enemy. Father Antonio, in the naïve benevolence of his heart, prayed each night for its conversion, as if it were a loved sinner. He believed this event to be not very far off accomplishment, and told me once, with an amazing simplicity of certitude, that "there will be a great joy amongst the host of heaven on that day." It is marvellous how that distant land, from which I had escaped as if from a prison to go in search of romance, appeared romantic and perfect in these days--all things to all men! With Seraphina I talked of it and its denizens as of a fabulous country. I wonder what idea she had formed of my father, of my mother, my sister--"Señora Dona Veronica Rooksby," she called her--of the landscape, of the life, of the sky.

Her eyes turned to me seriously. Once, stooping, she plucked an orange marigold for her hair; and at last we came to talk of our farm as the only perfect refuge for her.