

CHAPTER THREE

One evening Carlos, after a silence of distress, had said, "There's nothing else for it. When the crisis comes, you must carry her off from this unhappiness and misery that hangs over her head. You must take her out of Cuba; there is no safety for her here."

This took my breath away. "But where are we to go, Carlos?" I asked, bending over him.

"To--to England," he whispered.

He was utterly worn out that evening by all the perplexities of his death-bed. He made a great effort and murmured a few words more--about the Spanish ambassador in London being a near relation of the Riegos; then he gave it up and lay still under my amazed eyes. The nun was approaching, alarmed, from the shadows. Father Antonio, gazing sadly upon his beloved penitent, signed me to withdraw.

Castro had not gone away yet; he greeted me in low tones outside the big door.

"Señor," he went on, "I make my report usually to his Señoría Don Carlos; only I have not been admitted to-day into his rooms at all. But what I have to say is for your ear, also. There has arrived a friar from a Havana convent amongst the Lugarenos of the bay. I have known him come like this before."

I remembered that in the morning, while dressing, I had glanced out of the narrow outside window of my room, and had seen a brown, mounted figure passing on the sands. Its sandalled feet dangled against the flanks of a powerful mule.

Castro shook his head. "Malediction on his green eyes! He baptizes the offspring of this vermin sometimes, and sits for hours in the shade before the door of Domingo's posada telling his beads as piously as a devil that had turned monk for the greater undoing of us Christians. These women crowd there to kiss his oily paw. What else they----- Basta! Only I wanted to tell you, Señor, that this evening (I just come from taking a pasear that way) there is much talk in the villages of an evil-intentioned heretic that has introduced himself into this our town; of an Inglez hungry for men to hang--of you, in short."

The moon, far advanced in its first quarter, threw an ashen, bluish light upon

one-half of the courtyard; and the straight shadow upon the other seemed to lie at the foot of the columns, black as a broad stroke of Indian ink.

"And what do you think of it, Castro?" I asked.

"I think that Domingo has his orders. Manuel has made a song already. And do you know its burden, Señor? Killing is its burden. I would the devil had all these Improvisadores. They gape round him while he twangs and screeches, the wind-bag! And he knows what words to sing to them, too. He has talent. Maladetta!"

"Well, and what do you advise?"

"I advise the senor to keep, now, within the Casa. No songs can give that vermin the audacity to seek the senor here. The gate remains barred; the firearms are always loaded; and Cesar is a sagacious African. But methinks this moon would fall out of the heaven first before they would dare.... Keep to the Casa, I say--I, Tomas Castro."

He flung the corner of his cloak over his left shoulder, and preceded me to the door of my room; then, after a "God guard you, Señor," continued along the colonnade. Before I had shut my door it occurred to me that he was going on towards the part of the gallery on which Seraphina's apartments opened. Why? What could he want there?

I am not so much ashamed of my sudden suspicion of him--one did not know whom to trust--but I am a little ashamed to confess that, kicking off my shoes, I crept out instantly to spy upon him.

This part of the house was dark in the inky flood of shadow; and before I had come to a recess in the wall, I heard the discreet scratching of a finger-nail on a door. A streak of light darted and disappeared, like a signal for the murmurs of two voices.

I recognized the woman's at once. It belonged to one of Seraphina's maids, a pretty little quadroon--a favourite of hers--called La Chica. She had slipped out, and her twitter-like whispering reached me in the still solemnity of the quadrangle. She addressed Castro as "His Worship" at every second word, for the saturnine little man, in his unbrushed cloak and battered hat, was immensely respected by the household. Had he not been sent to Europe to fetch Don Carlos? He was in the confidence of the masters--their humble friend. The little tire-woman twittered of her mistress. The senorita had been most anxious all day--ever since she had heard the friar had come. Castro muttered:

"Tell the Excellency that her orders have been obeyed. The English caballero has been warned. I have been sleepless in my watchfulness over the guest of the house, as the senorita has desired--for the honour of the Riegos. Let her set her mind at ease."

The girl then whispered to him with great animation. Did not his worship think that it was the senorita's heart which was not at ease?

Then the quadrangle became dumb in its immobility, half sheen, half night, with its arcades, the soothing splash of water, with its expiring lights, in a suggestion of Castilian severity, enveloped by the exotic softness of the air.

"What folly!" uttered Castro's sombre voice. "You women do not mind how many corpses come into your imaginings of love. The mere whisper of such a thing-----"

She murmured swiftly. He interrupted her.

"Thine eyes, La Chica--thine eyes see only the silliness of thine own heart. Think of thine own lovers, nina. Por Dios!"--he changed to a tone of severe appreciation--"thy foolish face looks well by moonlight."

I believe he was chucking her gravely under the chin. I heard her soft, gratified cooing in answer to the compliment; the streak of light flashed on the polished shaft of a pillar; and Castro went on, going round to the staircase, evidently so as not to pass again before my open door.

I forgot to shut it. I did not stop until I was in the middle of my room; and then I stood still for a long time in a self-forgetful ecstasy, while the many wax candles of the high candelabrum burned without a flicker in a rich cluster of flames, as if lighted to throw the splendour of a celebration upon the pageant of my thoughts.

For the honour of the Riegos!

I came to myself. Well, it was sweet to be the object of her anxiety and care, even on these terms--on any terms. And I felt a sort of profound, inexpressible, grateful emotion, as though no one, never, on no day, on no occasion, had taken thought of me before.

I should not be able to sleep. I went to the window, and leaned my forehead on the iron bar. There was no glass; the heavy shutter was thrown open; and, under the faint crescent of the moon I saw a small part of the beach, very white, the long streak of light lying mistily on the bay, and two black shapes, cloaked,

moving and stopping all of a piece like pillars, their immensely long shadows running away from their feet, with the points of the hats touching the wall of the Casa Riego. Another, a shorter, thicker shape, appeared, walking with dignity. It was Castro. The other two had a movement of recoil, then took off their hats.

"Buenas noches, caballeros," his voice said, with grim politeness. "You are out late."

"So is your worship. Vaya, Señor, con Dios. We are taking the air."

They walked away, while Castro remained looking after them. But I, from my elevation, noticed that they had suddenly crouched behind some scrubby bushes growing on the edge of the sand. Then Castro, too, passed out of my sight in the opposite direction, muttering angrily.

I forgot them all. Everything on earth was still, and I seemed to be looking through a casement out of an enchanted castle standing in the dreamland of romance. I breathed out the name of Seraphina into the moonlight in an increasing transport. "Seraphina! Seraphina! Seraphina!" The repeated beauty of the sound intoxicated me. "Seraphina!" I cried aloud, and stopped, astounded at myself. And the moonlight of romance seemed to whisper spitefully from below:

"Death to the traitor! Vengeance for our brothers dead on the English gallows!"
"Come away, Manuel."

"No. I am an artist. It is necessary for my soul..."

"Be quiet!"

Their hissing ascended along the wall from under the window. The two Lugarenos had stolen in unnoticed by me. There was a stifled metallic ringing, as of a guitar carried under a cloak.

"Vengeance on the heretic Inglez!"

"Come away! They may suddenly open the gate and fall upon us with sticks."

"My gentle spirit is roused to the accomplishment of great things. I feel in me a valiance, an inspiration. I am no vulgar seller of aguardiente, like Domingo. I was born to be the capataz of the Lugarenos."

"We shall be set upon and beaten, oh, thou Manuel. Come away!"

There were no footsteps, only a noiseless flitting of two shadows, and a distant voice crying:

"Woe, woe, woe to the traitor!"

I had not needed Castro's warning to understand the meaning of this. O'Brien was setting his power to work, only this Manuel's restless vanity had taught me exactly how the thing was to be done. The friar had been exciting the minds of this rabble against me; awakening their suspicions, their hatred, their fears.

I remained at the casement, lost in rather sombre reflections. I was now a prisoner within the walls of the Casa. After all, it mattered little. I did not want to go away unless I could carry off Seraphina with me. What a dream! What an impossible dream! Alone, without friends, with no place to go to, without means of going; without, by Heaven, the right of even as much as speaking of it to her. Carlos--Carlos dreamed--a dream of his dying hours. England was so far, the enemy so near; and--Providence itself seemed to have forgotten me.

A sound of panting made me turn my head. Father Antonio was mopping his brow in the doorway. Though a heavy man, he was noiseless of foot. A wheezing would be heard along the dark galleries some time before his black bulk approached you with a gliding motion. He had the outward placidity of corpulent people, a natural artlessness of demeanour which was amusing and attractive, and there was something shrewd in his simplicity. Indeed, he must have displayed much tact and shrewdness to have defeated all O'Brien's efforts to oust him from his position of confessor to the household. What had helped him to hold his ground was that, as he said to me once, "I, too, my son, am a legacy of that truly pious and noble lady, the wife of Don Riego. I was made her spiritual director soon after her marriage, and I may say that she showed more discretion in the choice of her confessor than in that of her man of affairs. But what would you have? The best of us, except for Divine grace, is liable to err; and, poor woman, let us hope that, in her blessed state, she is spared the knowledge of the iniquities going on here below in the Casa."

He used to talk to me in that strain, coming in almost every evening on his way from the sick room. He, too, had his own perplexities, which made him wipe his forehead repeatedly; afterwards he used to spread his red bandanna handkerchief over his knees.

He sympathized with Carlos, his beloved penitent, with Seraphina, his dear daughter, whom he had baptized and instructed in the mysteries of "our holy religion," and he allowed himself often to drop the remark that his "illustrious spiritual son," Don Balthasar, after a stormy life of which men knew only too

much, had attained to a state of truly childlike and God-fearing innocence--a sign, no doubt, of Heaven's forgiveness for those excesses. He ended, always, by sighing heartily, to sit with his gaze on the floor.

That night he came in silently, and after shutting the door with care, took his habitual seat, a broad wooden armchair.

"How did your reverence leave Don Carlos?" I asked.

"Very low," he said. "The disease is making terrible ravages, and my ministrations-----I ought to be used to the sight of human misery, but-----" He raised his hands; a genuine emotion overpowered him; then, uncovering his face to stare at me, "He is lost, Don Juan," he exclaimed.

"Indeed, I fear we are about to lose him, your reverence," I said, surprised at this display. It seemed inconceivable that he should have been in doubt up to this very moment.

He rolled his eyes painfully. I was forgetting the infinite might of God. Still, nothing short of a miracle-----But what had we done to deserve miracles?

"Where is the ancient piety of our forefathers which made Spain so great?" he apostrophized the empty air, a little wildly, as if in distraction. "No, Don Juan; even I, a true servant of our faith, am conscious of not having had enough grace for my humble ministrations to poor sailors and soldiers--men naturally inclined to sin, but simple. And now--there are two great nobles, the fortune of a great house...."

I looked at him and wondered, for he was, in a manner, wringing his hands, as if in immense distress.

"We are all thinking of that poor child--mas que, Don Juan, imagine all that wealth devoted to the iniquitous purposes of that man. Her happiness sacrificed."

"I cannot imagine this--I will not," I interrupted, so violently that he hushed me with both hands uplifted.

"To these wild enterprises against your own country," he went on vehemently, disregarding my exasperated and contemptuous laugh. "And she

herself, the niña I have baptized her; I have instructed her; and a more noble disposition, more naturally inclined to the virtues and proprieties of her sex----- But, Don Juan, she has pride, which doubtless is a gift of God, too, but it is made

a snare of by Satan, the roaring lion, the thief of souls. And what if her feminine rashness--women are rash, my son," he interjected with unction--"and her pride were to lead her into--I am horrified at the thought--into an act of mortal sin for which there is no repentance?"

"Enough!" I shouted at him.

"No repentance," he repeated, rising to his feet excitedly, and I stood before him, my arms down my sides, with my fists clenched.

Why did the stupid priest come to talk like this to me, as if I had not enough of my own unbearable thoughts?

He sat down and began to flourish his handkerchief. There was depicted on his broad face--depicted simply and even touchingly--the inward conflict of his benevolence and of his doubts.

"I observe your emotion, my son," he said. I must have been as pale as death. And, after a pause, he meditated aloud, "And, after all, you English are a reverent nation. You, a scion of the nobility, have been brought up in deplorable rebellion against the authority of God on this earth; but you are not a scoffer--not a scoffer. I, a humble priest-----But, after all, the Holy Father himself, in his inspired wisdom-----I have prayed to be enlightened...."

He spread the square of his damp handkerchief on his knees, and bowed his head. I had regained command over myself, but I did not understand in the least. I had passed from my exasperation into a careworn fatigue of mind that was like utter darkness.

"After all," he said, looking up naively, "the business of us priests is to save souls. It is a solemn time when death approaches. The affairs of this world should be cast aside. And yet God surely does not mean us to abandon the living to the mercy of the wicked."

A sadness came upon his face, his eyes; all the world seemed asleep. He made an effort. "My son," he said with decision, "I call you to follow me to the bedside of Don Carlos at this very hour of night. I, a humble priest, the unworthy instrument of God's grace, call upon you to bring him a peace which my ministrations cannot give. His time is near."

I rose up, startled by his solemnity, by the hint of hidden significance in these words.

"Is he dying now?" I cried.

"He ought to detach his thoughts from this earth; and if there is no other way-----"

"What way? What am I expected to do?"

"My son, I had observed your emotion. We, the appointed confidants of men's frailties, are quick to discern the signs of their innermost feelings. Let me tell you that my cherished daughter in God, Señorita Dona Seraphina Riego, is with Don Carlos, the virtual head of the family, since his Excellency Don Balthasar is in a state of, I may say, infantile innocence."

"What do you mean, father?" I faltered.

"She is waiting for you with him," he pronounced, looking up. And as his solemnity seemed to have deprived me of my power to move, he added, with his ordinary simplicity, "Why, my son, she is, I may say, not wholly indifferent to your person."

I could not have dropped more suddenly into the chair had the good padre discharged a pistol into my breast. He went away; and when I leapt up, I saw a young man in black velvet and white ruffles staring at me out of the large mirror set frameless into the wall, like the apparition of a Spanish ghost with my own English face.

When I ran out, the moon had sunk below the ridge of the roof; the whole quadrangle of the Casa had turned black under the stars, with only a yellow glimmer of light falling into the well of the court from the lamp under the vaulted gateway. The form of the priest had gone out of sight, and a far-away knocking, mingling with my footfalls, seemed to be part of the tumult within my heart. Below, a voice at the gate challenged, "Who goes there?" I ran on. Two tiny flames burned before Carlos' door at the end of the long vista, and two of Seraphina's maids shrank away from the great mahogany panels at my approach. The candlesticks trembled askew in their hands; the wax guttered down, and the taller of the two girls, with an uncovered long neck, gazed at me out of big sleepy eyes in a sort of dumb wonder. The teeth of the plump little one--La Chica--rattled violently like castanets. She moved aside with a hysterical little laugh, and glanced upwards at me.

I stopped, as if I had intruded; of all the persons in the sick-room, not one turned a head. The stillness of the lights, of things, of the air, seemed to have passed into Seraphina's face. She stood with a stiff carriage under the heavy hangings of the

bed, looking very Spanish and romantic in her short black skirt, a black lace shawl enveloping her head, her shoulders, her arms, as low as the waist. Her bare feet, thrust into high-heeled slippers, lent to her presence an air of flight, as if she had run into that room in distress or fear. Carlos, sitting up amongst the snowy pillows of eider-down at his back, was not speaking to her. He had done; and the flush on his cheek, the eager lustre of his eyes, gave him an appearance of animation, almost of joy, a sort of consuming, flame-like brilliance. They were waiting for me. With all his eagerness and air of life, all he could do was to lift his white hand an inch or two off the silk coverlet that spread over his limbs smoothly, like a vast crimson pall. There was something joyous and cruel in the shimmer of this piece of colour, contrasted with the dead white of the linen, the duskiness of the wasted face, the dark head with no visible body, symbolically motionless. The confused shadows and the tarnished splendour of emblazoned draperies, looped up high under the ceiling, fell in heavy and unstirring folds right down to the polished floor, that reflected the lights like a sheet of water, or rather like ice.

I felt it slippery under my feet. I, alone, had to move, in this great chamber, with its festive patches of colour amongst the funereal shadows, with the expectant, still figures of priest and nun, servants of passionless eternity, as if immobilized and made mute by hostile wonder before the perishable triumph of life and love. And only the impatient tapping of the sick man's hand on the stiff silk of the coverlet was heard.

It called to me. Seraphina's unstirring head was lighted strongly by a two-branched sconce on the wall; and when I stood by her side, not even the shadow of the eyelashes on her cheek trembled. Carlos' lips moved; his voice was almost extinct; but for all his emaciation, the profundity of his eyes, the sunken cheeks, the hollow temples, he remained attractive, with the charm of his gallant and romantic temper worn away to an almost unearthly fineness.

He was going to have his desire because, on the threshold of his spiritual inheritance, he refused, or was unable, to turn his gaze away from this world. Father Antonio's business was to save this soul; and with a sort of simple and sacerdotal shrewdness, in which there was much love for his most noble penitent, he would try to appease its trouble by a romantic satisfaction. His voice, very grave and profound, addressed me:

"Approach, my son--nearer. We trust the natural feelings of pity which are implanted in every human breast, the nobility of your extraction, the honour of your hidalguidad, and that inextinguishable courage which, as by the unwearied mercy of God, distinguishes the sons of your fortunate and unhappy nation." His bass voice, deepened in solemn utterance, vibrated huskily. There was a rustic

dignity in his uncouth form, in his broad face, in the gesture of the raised hand. "You shall promise to respect the dictates of our conscience, guided by the authority of our faith; to defer to our scruples, and to the procedure of our Church in matters which we believe touch the welfare of our souls.... You promise?"

He waited. Carlos' eyes burned darkly on my face. What were they asking of me? This was nothing. Of course I would respect her scruples--her scruples--if my heart should break. I felt her living intensely by my side; she could be brought no nearer to me by anything they could do, or I could promise. She had already all the devotion of my love and youth, the unreasoning and potent devotion, without a thought or hope of reward. I was almost ashamed to pronounce the two words they expected. "I promise."

And suddenly the meaning pervading this scene, something that was in my mind already, and that I had hardly dared to look at till now, became clear to me in its awful futility against the dangers, in all its remote consequences. It was a betrothal. The priest--Carlos, too--must have known that it had no binding power. To Carlos it was symbolic of his wishes. Father Antonio was thinking of the papal dispensation. I was a heretic. What if it were refused? But what was that risk to me, who had never dared to hope? Moreover, they had brought her there, had persuaded her; she had been influenced by her fears, impressed by Carlos. What could she care for me? And I repeated:

"I promise. I promise, even at the cost of suffering and unhappiness, never to demand anything from her against her conscience."

Carlos' voice sounded weak. "I answer for him, good father." Then he seemed to wander in a whisper, which we two caught faintly, "He resembles his sister, O Divine-----"

And on this ghostly sigh, on this breath, with the feeble click of beads in the nun's hands, a silence fell upon the room, vast as the stillness of a world of unknown faiths, loves, beliefs, of silent illusions, of unexpressed passions and secret motives that live in our unfathomable hearts.

Seraphina had given me a quick glance--the first glance--which I had rather felt than seen. Carlos made an effort, and, raising himself, put her hand in mine.

Father Antonio, trying to pronounce a short allocution, broke down, naïve in his emotion, as he had been in his dignity. I could at first catch only the words, "Beloved child--Holy Father--poor priest...." He had taken this upon himself; and he would attest the purity of our intentions, the necessity of the case, the assent

of the head of the family, my excellent disposition. All the Englishmen had excellent dispositions. He would, personally, go to the foot of the Holy See--on his knees, if necessary. Meantime, a document--he should at once prepare a justificative document. The archbishop, it is true, did not like him on account of the calumnies of that man O'Brien. But there was, beyond the seas, the supreme authority of the Church, unerring and inaccessible to calumnies.

All that time Seraphina's hand was lying passive in my palm--warm, soft, living; all the life, all the world, all the happiness, the only desire--and I dared not close my grasp, afraid of the vanity of my hopes, shrinking from the intense felicity in the audacious act. Father Antonio--I must say the word--blubbered. He was now only a tender-hearted, simple old man, nothing more.

"Before God now, Don Juan.... I am only a poor priest, but invested with a sacred office, an enormous power. Tremble, Señor, it is a young girl... I have loved her like my own; for, indeed, I have in baptism given her the spiritual life. You owe her protection; it is for that, before God, Señor-----"

It was as if Carlos had swooned; his eyes were closed, his face like a carving. But gradually the suggestion of a tender and ironic smile appeared on his lips. With a slow effort he raised his arm and his eyelids, in an appeal of all his weariness for my ear. I made a movement to stoop over him, and the floor, the great bed, the whole room, seemed to heave and sway. I felt a slight, a fleeting pressure of Seraphina's hand before it slipped out of mine; I thought, in the beating rush of blood to my temples, that I was going mad.

He had thrown his arm over my neck; there was the calming austerity of death on his lips, that just touched my ear and departed, together with the far-away sound of the words, losing themselves in the remoteness of another world:

"Like an Englishman, Juan."

"On my honour, Carlos."

His arm, releasing my neck, fell stretched out on the coverlet. Father Antonio had mastered his emotion; with the trail of undried tears on his face, he had become a priest again, exalted above the reach of his earthly sorrow by the august concern of his sacerdotal duty.

"Don Carlos, my son, is your mind at ease, now?"

Carlos closed his eyes slowly.

"Then turn all your thoughts to heaven." Father Antonio's bass voice rose, aloud, with an extraordinary authority. "You have done with the earth."

The arm of the nun touched the cords of the curtains» and the massive folds shook and fell expanded, hiding from us the priest and the penitent.