

## CHAPTER FOUR

Seraphina and I moved towards the door sadly, as if under the oppression of a memory, as people go back from the side of a grave to the cares of life. No exultation possessed me. Nothing had happened. It had been a sick man's whim.

"Señorita," I said low, with my hand on the wrought bronze of the door-handle, "Don Carlos might have died in full trust of my devotion to you--without this."

"I know it," she answered, hanging her head.

"It was his wish," I said. "And I deferred."

"It was his wish," she repeated.

"Remember he had asked you for no promise."

"Yes, it is you only he has asked. You have remembered it very well, Señor. And you--you ask for nothing."

"No," I said; "neither from your heart nor from your conscience--nor from your gratitude. Gratitude from you! As if it were not I that owe you gratitude for having condescended to stand with your hand in mine--if only for a moment--if only to bring peace to a dying man; for giving me the felicity, the illusion of this wonderful instant, that, all my life, I shall remember as those who are suddenly stricken blind remember the great glory of the sun. I shall live with it, I shall cherish it in my heart to my dying day; and I promise never to mention it to you again."

Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes remained downcast, her head drooped as if in extreme attention.

"I asked for no promise," she murmured coldly.

My heart was heavy. "Thank you for that proof of your confidence," I said. "I am yours without any promises. Wholly yours. But what can I offer? What help? What refuge? What protection? What can I do? I can only die for you. Ah, but this was cruel of Carlos, when he knew that I had nothing else but my poor life to give."

"I accept that," she said unexpectedly. "Señorita, it is generous of you to accept so

worthless a gift--a life I value not at all save for one unique memory which I owe to you."

I knew she was looking at me while I swung open the door with a low bow. I did not trust myself to look at her. An unreasonable disenchantment, like the awakening from a happy dream, oppressed me. I felt an almost angry desire to seize her in my arms--to go back to my dream. If I had looked at her then, I believed I could not have controlled myself.

She passed out; and when I looked up there was O'Brien booted and spurred, but otherwise in his lawyer's black, inclining his dapper figure profoundly before her in the dim gallery. She had stopped short. The two maids, huddled together behind her, stared with terrified eyes. The flames of their candles vacillated very much.

I closed the door quietly. Carlos was done with the earth. This had become my affair; and the necessity of coming to an immediate decision almost deprived me of my power of thinking. The necessity had arisen too swiftly; the arrival of that man acted like the sudden apparition of a phantom. It had been expected, however; only, from the moment we had turned away from Carlos' bedside, we had thought of nothing but ourselves; we had dwelt alone in our emotions, as if there had been no inhabitant of flesh and blood on the earth but we two. Our danger had been present, no doubt, in our minds, because we drew it in with every breath. It was the indispensable condition of our contact, of our words, of our thoughts; it was the atmosphere of our feelings; a something as all-pervading and impalpable as the air we drew into our lungs. And suddenly this danger, this breath of our life, had taken this material form. It was material and expected, and yet it had the effect of an evil spectre, inasmuch as one did not know where and how it was vulnerable, what precisely it would do, how one should defend one's self.

His bow was courtly; his gravity was all in his bearing, which was quiet and confident: the manner of a capable man, the sort of man the great of this earth find invaluable and are inclined to trust. His full-shaven face had a good-natured, almost a good-humored expression, which I have come to think must have depended on the cast of his features, on the setting of his eyes--on some peculiarity not under his control, or else he could not have preserved it so well. On certain occasions, as this one, for instance, it affected me as a refinement of cynicism; and, generally, it was startling, like the assumption of a mask inappropriate to the action and the speeches of the part.

He had journeyed in his customary manner overland from Havana, arriving unexpectedly at night, as he had often done before; only this time he had found

the little door, cut out in one of the sides of the big gate, bolted fast. It was his knocking I had heard, as I hurried after the priest. The major-domo, who had been called up to let him in, told me afterwards that the senior intendente had put no question whatever to him as to this, and had gone on, as usual, towards his own room. Nobody knew what was going on in Carlos' chamber, but, of course, he came upon the two girls at the door. He said nothing to them either, only just stopped there and waited, leaning with one elbow on the balustrade with his good-tempered, gray eyes fixed on the door. He had fully expected to see Seraphina come out presently, but I think he did not count on seeing me as well. When he straightened himself up after the bow, we two were standing side by side.

I had stepped quickly towards her, asking myself what he would do. He did not seem to be armed; neither had I any weapon about me. Would he fly at my throat? I was the bigger, and the younger man. I wished he would. But he found a way of making me feel all his other advantages. He did not recognize my existence. He appeared not to see me at all. He seemed not to be aware of Seraphina's startled immobility, of my firm attitude; but turning his good-humoured face towards the two girls, who appeared ready to sink through the floor before his gaze, he shook his fore-finger at them slightly.

This was all. He was not menacing; he was almost playful; and this gesture, marvellous in its economy of effort, disclosed all the might and insolence of his power. It had the unerring efficacy of an act of instinct. It was instinct. He could not know how he dismayed us by that shake of the finger. The tall girl dropped her candlestick with a clatter, and fled along the gallery like a shadow. La Chica cowered under the wall. The light of her candle just touched dimly the form of a negro boy, waiting passively in the background with O'Brien's saddle-bags over his shoulder.

"You see," said Seraphina to me, in a swift, desolate murmur. "They are all like this--all, all."

Without a change of countenance, without emphasis, he said to her in French:

"Votre père dort sans doute, Señorita."

And she intrepidly replied, "You know very well, Señor Intendente, that nothing can make him open his eyes."

"So it seems," he muttered between his teeth, stooping to pick up the dropped candlestick. It was lying at my feet. I could have taken him at a disadvantage, then; I could have felled him with one blow, thrown myself upon his back. Thus

may an athletic prisoner set upon a jailer coming into his cell, if there were not the prison, the locks, the bars, the heavy gates! the walls, all the apparatus of captivity, and the superior weight of the idea chaining down the will, if not the courage.

It might have been his knowledge of this, or his absolute disdain of me. The unconcerned manner in which he busied himself--his head within striking distance of my fist--in lighting the extinguished candle from the trembling Chica's humiliated me beyond expression. He had some difficulty with that, till he said to her just audibly, "Calm thyself, niña," and she became rigid in her appearance of excessive terror.

He turned then towards Seraphina, candlestick in hand, courteously saying in Spanish:

"May I be allowed to help light you to your door, since that silly Juanita--I think it was Juanita--has taken leave of her senses? She is not fit to remain in your service--any more than this one here."

With a gasp of desolation, La Chica began to sob limply against the wall. I made one step forward; and, holding the candle well up, as though for the purpose of examining my face carefully, he never looked my way, while he and Seraphina were exchanging a few phrases in French which I did not understand well enough to follow.

He was politely interrogatory, it seemed to me. The natural, good-humoured expression never left his face, as though he had a fund of inexhaustible patience for dealing with the unaccountable trifles of a woman's conduct. Seraphina's shawl had slipped off her head. La Chica sidled towards her, sobbing a deep sob now and then, without any sign of tears; and with their scattered hair, their bare arms, the disorder of their attire, they looked like two women discovered in a secret flight for life. Only the mistress stood her ground firmly; her voice was decided; there was resolution in the way one little white hand clutched the black lace on her bosom. Only once she seemed to hesitate in her replies. Then, after a pause he gave her for reflection, he appeared to repeat his question. She glanced at me apprehensively, as I thought, before she confirmed the previous answer by a slow inclination of her head.

Had he allowed himself to make a provoking movement, a dubious gesture of any sort, I would have flung myself upon him at once; but the nonchalant manner in which he looked away, while he extended to me his hand with the candlestick, amazed me. I simply took it from him. He stepped back, with a ceremonious bow for Seraphina. La Chica ran up close to her elbow. I heard her voice saying sadly,

"You need fear nothing for yourself, child"; and they moved away slowly. I remained facing O'Brien, with a vague notion of protecting their retreat.

This time it was I who was holding the light before his face. It was calm and colourless; his eyes were fixed on the ground reflectively, with the appearance of profound and quiet absorption. But suddenly I perceived the convulsive clutch of his hand on the skirt of his coat. It was as if accidentally I had looked inside the man--upon the strength of his illusions, on his desire, on his passion. Now he will fly at me, I thought, with a tremendously convincing certitude. Now-----All my muscles, stiffening, answered the appeal of that thought of battle.

He said, "Won't you give me that light?"

And I understood he demanded a surrender.

"I would see you die first where you stand," was my answer.

This object in my hand had become endowed with moral meaning--significant, like a symbol--only to be torn from me with my life.

He lifted his head; the light twinkled in his eyes. "Oh, I won't die," he said, with that bizarre suggestion of humour in his face, in his subdued voice. "But it is a small thing; and you are young; it may be yet worth your while to try and please me--this time."

Before I could answer, Seraphina, from some little distance, called out hurriedly:

"Don Juan, your arm."

Her voice, sounding a little unsteady, made me forget O'Brien, and, turning my back on him, I ran up to her. She needed my support; and before us La Chica tottered and stumbled along with the lights, moaning:

"Madré de Dios! What will become of us now! Oh, what will become of us now!"

"You know what he had asked me to let him do," Seraphina talked rapidly. "I made answer, 'No; give the light to my cousin.' Then he said, 'Do you really wish it, Señorita? I am the older friend.' I repeated, 'Give the light to my cousin, Señor.' He, then, cruelly, 'For the young man's own sake, reflect, Señorita.' And he waited before he asked me again, 'Shall I surrender it to him?' I felt death upon my heart, and all my fear for you--there." She touched her beautiful throat with a swift movement of a hand that disappeared at once under the lace. "And because I could not speak, I-----Don Juan, you have just offered me your life--I-----"

Misericordia! What else was possible? I made with my head the sign 'Yes.'

In the stress, hurry, and rapture encompassing my immense gratitude, I pressed her hand to my side familiarly, as if we had been two lovers walking in a lane on a serene evening.

"If you had not made that sign, it would have been worse than death--in my heart," I said. "He had allied me, too, to renounce my trust, my light."

We walked on slowly, accompanied in our sudden silence by the plash of the fountain at the bottom of the great square of darkness on our left, and by the piteous moans of La Chica.

"That is what he meant," said the enchanting voice by my side. "And you refused. That is your valour."

"From no selfish motives," I said, troubled, as if all the great incertitude of my mind had been awakened by the sound that brought so much delight to my heart. "My valour is nothing."

"It has given me a new courage," she said.

"You did not want more," I said earnestly.

"Ah! I was very much alone. It is difficult to-----"

She hesitated.

"To live alone," I finished.

"More so to die," she whispered, with a new note of timidity. "It is frightful. Be cautious, Don Juan, for the love of God, because I could not-----"

We stopped. La Chica, silent, as if exhausted, drooped lamentably, with her shoulder against the wall, by Seraphina's door; and the pure crystalline sound of the fountain below, enveloping the parting pause, seemed to wind its coldness round my heart.

"Poor Don Carlos!" she said. "I had a great affection for him. I was afraid they would want me to marry him. He loved your sister."

"He never told her," I murmured. "I wonder if she ever guessed."

"He was poor, homeless, ill already, in a foreign land."

"We all loved him at home," I said.

"He never asked her," she breathed out. "And, perhaps--but he never asked her."

"I have no more force," sighed La Chica, suddenly, and sank down at the foot of the wall, putting the candlesticks on the floor.

"You have been very good to him," I said; "only he need not have demanded this from you. Of course, I understood perfectly.... I hope you understand, too, that I-- ----"

"Señor, my cousin," she flashed out suddenly, "do you think that I would have consented only from my affection for him?"

"Señorita," I cried, "I am poor, homeless, in a foreign land. How can I believe? How can I dare to dream?--unless your own voice-----"

"Then you are permitted to ask. Ask, Don Juan."

I dropped on one knee, and, suddenly extending her arm, she pressed her hand to my lips. Lighted up from below, the picturesque aspect of her figure took on something of a transcendental grace; the unusual upward shadows invested her beauty with a new mystery of fascination. A minute passed. I could hear her rapid breathing above, and I stood up before her, holding both her hands.

"How very few days have we been together," she whispered. "Juan, I am ashamed."

"I did not count the days. I have known you always. I have dreamed of you since I can remember--for days, for months, a year, all my life."

The crash of a heavy door flung to, exploded, filling the galleries all round the patio with the sonorous reminder of our peril.

"Ah! We had forgotten."

I heard her voice, and felt her form in my arms. Her lips at my ear pronounced:

"Remember, Juan. Two lives, but one death only."

And she was gone so quickly that it was as though she had passed through the

wood of the massive panels.

La Chica crouched on her knees. The lights on the floor burned before her empty stare, and with her bare shoulders the tone of old ivory emerging from the white linen, with wisps of raven hair hanging down her cheeks, the abandonment of her whole person embodied every outward mark and line of desolation.

"What do you fear from him?" I asked.

She looked up; moved nearer to me on her knees. "I have a lover outside."

She seized her hair wildly, drew it across her face, tried to stuff handfuls of it into her mouth, as if to stop herself from shrieking.

"He shook his finger at me," she moaned.

Her terror, as incomprehensible as the emotion of an animal, was gaining upon me. I said sternly:

"What can he do, then?"

"I don't know."

She did not know. She was like me. She feared for her love. Like myself! Was there anything in the way of our undoing which it was not in his power to achieve?

"Try to be faithful to your mistress," I said, "and all may be well yet."

She made no answer, but staggered to her feet, and went away blindly through the door, which opened just wide enough to let her through. There were clouds on the sky. The patio, in its blackness, was like the rectangular mouth of a bottomless pit. I picked up the candlesticks, and lighted myself to my room, walking upon air, upon tempestuous air, in a feeling of insecurity and exultation.

The lights of my candelabrum had gone out. I stood the two candlesticks on a table, and the shadows of the room, uplifted above the two flames as high as the ceiling, filled the corners heavily like gathered draperies, descended to the foot of the four walls in the shape of a military tent, in which warlike objects vaguely gleamed: a trophy of ancient arquebuses and conquering swords, arranged with bows, spears, the stick and stone weapons of an extinct race, a war collar of shells or pebbles, a round wicker-work shield in a halo of arrows, with a matchlock piece on each side--of the sort that had to be served by two men.



I had left the door of my room open on purpose, so that he should know I was back there, and ready for him. I took down a long straight blade, like a rapier, with a basket hilt. It was a cumbrous weapon, and with a blunt edge; still, it had a point, and I was ready to thrust and parry against the world. I called upon my foes. No enemy appeared, and by the light of two candles, with a sword in my hand, I lost myself in the foreshadowings of the future.

It was positive and uncertain. I wandered in it like a soul outside the gates of paradise, with an anticipation of bliss, and the pain of my exclusion. There was only one man in the way. I was certain he had been watching us across the blackness of the patio. He must have seen the dimly-lit dumb show of our parting at Sera-phina's door. I hoped he had understood, and that my shadow, bearing the two lights, had struck him as triumphant and undismayed, walking upon air. I strained my ears. I had heard....

Somebody was coming towards me along the silent galleries. It was he; I knew it. He was coming nearer and nearer. In the profound, tomb-like stillness of the great house, I had heard the sound of his footsteps on the tessellated pavement from afar. Now he had turned the corner, and the calm, strolling pace of his approach was enough to strike awe into an adversary's heart. It never hesitated, not once; never hurried; never slowed till it stopped. He stood in the doorway.

I suppose, in that big room, by the light of two candles, I must have presented an impressive picture of a menacing youth all in black, with a tense face, and holding a naked, long rapier in his hand. At any rate, he stood still, eyeing me from the doorway, the picture of a dapper Spanish lawyer in a lofty frame; all in black, also, with a fair head and a well-turned leg advanced in a black silk stocking. He had taken off his riding boots. For the rest, I had never seen him dressed otherwise. There was no weapon in his hand, or at his side.

I lowered the point, and, seeing he remained on the doorstep, as if not willing to trust himself within, I said disdainfully:

"You don't suppose I would murder a defenceless man."

"Am I defenceless?" He had a slight lift of the eyebrows. "That is news, indeed. It is you who are supposing. I have been a very certain man for this many a year."

"How can you know how an English gentleman would feel and act? I am neither a murderer nor yet an intriguer."

He walked right in rapidly, and, getting round to the other side of the table, drew

a small pistol out of his breeches pocket.

"You see--I am not trusting too much to your English generosity."

He laid the pistol negligently on the table. I had turned about on my heels. As we stood, by lunging between the two candlesticks, I should have been able to run him through the body before he could cry out.

I laid the sword on the table.

"Would you trust a damned Irish rebel?" he asked.

"You are wrong in your surmise. I would have nothing to do with a rebel, even in my thoughts and suppositions. I think that the Intendente of Don Balthasar Riego would look twice before murdering in a bedroom the guest of the house--a relation, a friend of the family."

"That's sensible," he said, with that unalterable air of good nature, which sometimes was like the most cruel mockery of humour. "And do you think that even a relation of the Riegos would escape the scaffold for killing Don Patricio O'Brien, one of the Royal Judges of the Marine Court, member of the Council, Procurator to the Chapter...."

"Intendente of the Casa," I threw in.

"That's my gratitude," he said gravely. "So you see...."

"Supreme chief of thieves and picaroons," I suggested again.

He answered this by a gesture of disdainful superiority.

"I wonder if you---if any of you English--would have the courage to risk your all--ambition, pride, position, wealth, peace of mind, your dearest hope, your self-respect--like this. For an idea."

His tone, that revealed something exalted and sad behind everything that was sordid and base in the acts of that man's villainous tools, struck me with astonishment. I beheld, as an inseparable whole, the contemptible result, the childishness of his imagination, the danger of his recklessness, and something like loftiness in his pitiful illusion.

"Nothing's too hot, too dirty, too heavy. Any way to get at you English; any means. To strike! That's the thing. I would die happy if I knew I had helped to detach

from you one island--one little island of all the earth you have filched away, stolen, taken by force, got by lying.... Don't taunt me with your taunts of thieves. What weapons better worthy of you could I use? Oh, I am modest. I am modest. This is a little thing, this Jamaica. What do I care for the Separationist blatherskite more than for the loyal fools? You are all English to me. If I had my way, your Empire would die of pin-pricks all over its big, overgrown body. Let only one bit drop off. If robbing your ships may help it, then, as you see me standing here, I am ready to go myself in a leaky boat. I tell you Jamaica's gone. And that may be the beginning of the end."

He lifted his arm not at me, but at England, if I may judge from his burning stare. It was not to me he was speaking. There we were, Irish and English, face to face, as it had been ever since we had met in the narrow way of the world that had never been big enough for the tribes, the nations, the races of man.

"Now, Mr. O'Brien, I don't know what you may do to me, but I won't listen to any of this," I said, very red in the face.

"Who wants you to listen?" he muttered absently, and went away from the table to look out of the loophole, leaving me there with the sword and the pistol.

Whatever he might have said of the scaffold, this was very imprudent of him. It was characteristic of the man--of that impulsiveness which existed in him side by side with his sagacity, with his coolness in intrigue, with his unmerciful and revengeful temper. By my own feelings I understood what an imprudence it was. But he was turning his back on me, and how could I?... His imprudence was so complete that it made for security. He did not, I am sure, remember my existence. I would just as soon have jumped with a dagger upon a man in the dark.

He was really stirred to his depths--to the depths of his hate, and of his love--by seeing me, an insignificant youth (I was no more), surge up suddenly in his path. He turned where he stood at last, and contemplated me with a sort of thoughtful surprise, as though he had tried to account to himself for my existence.

"No," he said, to himself really, "I wonder when I look at you. How did you manage to get that pretty reputation over there? Ramon's a fool. He shall know it to his cost. But the craftiness of that Carlos! Or is it only my confounded willingness to believe?"

He was putting his finger nearly on the very spot. I said nothing.

"Why," he exclaimed, "when it's all boiled down, you are only an English beggar boy."

"I've come to a man's estate since we met last," I said meaningly.

He seemed to meditate over this. His face never changed, except, perhaps, to an even more amused benignity of expression.

"You have lived very fast by that account," he remarked artlessly. "Is it possible now? Well, life, as you know, can't last forever; and, indeed, taking a better look at you in this poor light, you do seem to be very near death."

I did not flinch; and, with a very dry mouth, I uttered defiantly:

"Such talk means nothing."

"Bravely said. But this is not talk. You've gone too fast. I am giving you a chance to turn back."

"Not an inch," I said fiercely. "Neither in thought, in deed; not even in semblance."

He seemed as though he wanted to swallow a bone in his throat.

"Believe me, there is more in life than you think. There is at your age, more than..." he had a strange contortion of the body, as though in a sudden access of internal pain; that humorous smile, that abode in the form of his lips, changed into a ghastly, forced grin... "than one love in a life--more than one woman."

I believe he tried to leer at me, because his voice was absolutely dying in his throat. My indignation was boundless. I cried out with the fire of deathless conviction:

"It is not true. You know it is not true."

He was speechless for a time; then, shaking and stammering with that inward rage that seemed to heave like molten lava in his breast, without ever coming to the surface of his face:

"What! Is it I, then, who have to go back? For--for you---a boy--come from devil knows where--an English, beggarly.... For a girl's whim.... I--a man."

He calmed down. "No; you are mad. You are dreaming. You don't know. You can't--you! You don't know what a man is; you with your calf-love a day old. How dare you look at me who have breathed for years in the very air? You fool--you little, wretched fool! For years sleeping, and waking, and working...."

"And intriguing," I broke in, "and plotting, and deceiving--for years."

This calmed him altogether. "I am a man; you are but a boy; or else I would not have to tell you that your love"--he choked at the word--"is to mine like--like--"

His eyes fell on a cut-glass water-ewer, and, with a convulsive sweep of his arm, he sent it flying far away from the table. It fell heavily, shattering itself with the unringing thud of a piece of ice. "Like this." He remained for some time with his eyes fixed on the table, and when he looked up at me it was with a sort of amused incredulity. His tone was not resentful. He spoke in a business-like manner, a little contemptuously. I had only Don Carlos to thank for the position in which I found myself. What the "poor devil over there" expected from me, he, O'Brien, would not inquire. It was a ridiculous boy-and-girl affair. If those two--meaning Carlos and Seraphina--had not been so mighty clever, I should have been safe now in Jamaica jail, on a charge of treasonable practices. He seemed to find the idea funny. Well, anyhow, he had meant no worse by me than my own dear countrymen. When he, O'Brien, had found how absurdly he had been hoodwinked by Don Carlos--the poor devil--and misled by Ramon--he would make him smart for it, yet--all he had intended to do was to lodge me in Havana jail. On his word of honour...

"Me in jail!" I cried angrily. "You--you would dare! On what charge? You could not...."

"You don't know what Pat O'Brien can do in Cuba."

The little country solicitor came out in a flash from under the Spanish lawyer. Then he frowned slightly at me. "You being an Englishman, I would have had you taken up on a charge of stealing."

Blood rushed to my face. I lost control over myself. "Mr. O'Brien," I said, "I dare say you could have trumped up anything against me. You are a very great scoundrel."

"Why? Because I don't lie about my motives, as you all do? I would wish you to know that I would scorn to lie either to myself or to you."

I touched the haft of the sword on the table. It was lying with the point his way.

"I had been thinking," said I, in great heat, "to propose to you that we should fight it out between us two, man to man, rebel and traitor as you have been."

"The devil you have!" he muttered.

"But really you are too much of a Picaroon. I think the gallows should be your end."

I gave rein to my exasperation, because I felt myself hopelessly in his power. What he was driving at, I could not tell. I had an intolerable sense of being as much at his mercy as though I had been lying bound hand and foot on the floor. It gave me pleasure to tell him what I thought. And, perhaps, I was not quite candid, either. Suppose I provoked him enough to fire his pistol at me. He had been fingering the butt, absently, as we talked. He might have missed me, and then.... Or he might have shot me dead. But surely there was some justice in Cuba. It was clear enough that he did not wish to kill me himself. Well, this was a desperate strait; to force him to do something he did not wish to do, even at the cost of my own life, was the only step left open to me to thwart his purpose; the only thing I could do just then for the furtherance of my mission to save Seraphina from his intrigues. I was oppressed by the misery of it all. As to killing him as he stood--if I could do it by being very quick with the old rapier--my bringing up, my ideas, my very being, recoiled from it. I had never taken a life. I was very young. I was not used to scenes of violence; and to begin like this in cold blood! Not only my conscience, but my very courage faltered. Truth to tell, I was afraid; not for myself--I had the courage to die; but I was afraid of the act. It was the unknown for me--for my nerve--for my conscience. And then the Spanish gallows! That, too, revolted me. To kill him, and then kill myself.... No, I must live. "Two lives, one death," she had said..... For a second or two my brain reeled with horror; I was certainly losing my self-possession. His voice broke upon that nightmare.

"It may be your lot, yet," it said. I burst into a nervous laugh. For a moment I could not stop myself.

"I won't murder you," I cried.

To this he said astonishingly, "Will you go to Mexico?"

It sounded like a joke. He was very serious. "I shall send one of the schooners there on a little affair of mine. I can make use of you. I give you this chance." It was as though he had thrown a bucketful of water over me. I had an inward shiver, and became quite cool. It was his turn now to let himself go.

It was a matter of delivering certain papers to the Spanish commandant in Tamaulipas. There would be some employment found for me with the Royal troops. I was a relation of the Riegos. And there came upon his voice a strange

ardour; a swiftness into his utterance. He walked away from the table; came back, and gazed into my face in a marked, expectant manner. He was not prompted by any love for me, he said, and gave an uncertain laugh.

My wits had returned to me wholly; and as he repeated "No love for you--no love for you," I had the intuition that what influenced him was his love for Seraphina. I saw it. I read it in the workings of his face. His eyes retained his good-humoured twinkle. He did not attach any importance to a boy-and-girl affair; not at all--pah! The lady, naturally young, warmhearted, full of kindness. I mustn't think.... Ha, ha! A man of his age, of course, understood.... No importance at all.

He walked away from the table trying to snap his fingers, and, suddenly, he reeled; he reeled, as though he had been overcome by the poison of his jealousy--as though a thought had stabbed him to the heart. There was an instant when the sight of that man moved me more than anything I had seen of passionate suffering before (and that was nothing), or since. He longed to kill me--I felt it in the very air of the room; and he loved her too much to dare. He laughed at me across the table. I had ridiculously misunderstood a very proper and natural kindness of a girl with not much worldly experience. He had known her from the earliest childhood.

"Take my word for it," he stammered.

It seemed to me that there were tears in his eyes. A stiff smile was parting his lips. He took up the pistol, and evidently not knowing anything about it, looked with an air of curiosity into the barrel.

It was time to think of making my career. That's what I ought to be thinking of at my age. "At your age--at your age," he repeated aimlessly. I was an Englishman. He hated me--and it was easy to believe this, though he neither glared nor grimaced. He smiled.

He smiled continuously and rather pitifully. But his devotion to a--a--person who.... His devotion was great enough to overcome even that, even that. Did I understand? I owed it to the lady's regard, which, for the rest, I had misunderstood--stupidly misunderstood.

"Well, at your age it's excusable!" he mumbled. "A career that..."

"I see," I said slowly. Young as I was, it was impossible to mistake his motives. Only a man of mature years, and really possessed by a great passion--by a passion that had grown slowly, till it was exactly as big as his soul--could have acted like this--with that profound simplicity, with such resignation, with such

horrible moderation--But I wanted to find out more. "And when would you want me to go?" I asked, with a dissimulation of which I would not have suspected myself capable a moment before. I was maturing in the fire of love, of danger; in the lurid light of life piercing through my youthful innocence.

"Ah," he said, banging the pistol on to the table hurriedly. "At once. To-night. Now."

"Without seeing anybody?"

"Without seeing... Oh, of course. In your own interest."

He was very quiet now. "I thought you looked intelligent enough," he said, appearing suddenly very tired. "I am glad you see your position. You shall go far in the Royal service, on the faith of Pat O'Brien, English as you are. I will make it my own business for the sake of--the Riego family. There is only one little condition."

He pulled out of his pocket a piece of paper, a pen, a travelling inkstand. He looked the lawyer to the life; the Spanish family lawyer grafted on an Irish attorney.

"You can't see anybody. But you ought to write. Dona Seraphina naturally would be interested. A cousin and... I shall explain to Don Balthasar, of course.... I will dictate: 'Out of regard for your future, and the desire for active life, of your own will, you accept eagerly Señor O'Brien's proposition.' She'll understand."

"Oh, yes, she'll understand," I said.

"Yes. And that you will write of your safe arrival in Tamaulipas. You must promise to write. Your word..."

"By heavens, Señor O'Brien!" I burst out with inexpressible scorn, "I thought you meant your villains to cut my throat on the passage. I should have deserved no better fate."

He started. I shook with rage. A change had come upon both of us as sudden as if we had been awakened by a violent noise. For a time we did not speak a word. One look at me was enough for him. He passed his hand over his forehead.

"What devil's in you, boy?" he said. "I seem to make nothing but mistakes."

He went to the loophole window, and, advancing his head, cried out:



"The schooner does not sail to-night."

He had some of his cut-throats posted under the window. I could not make out the reply he got; but after a while he said distinctly, so as to be heard below:

"I give up that spy to you." Then he came back, put the pistol in his pocket, and said to me, "Fool! I'll make you long for death yet."

"You've given yourself away pretty well," I said. "Some day I shall unmask you. It will be my revenge on you for daring to propose to me...."

"What?" he interrupted, over his shoulder. "You? Not you--and I'll tell you why. It's because dead men tell no tales."

He passed through the door--a back view of a dapper Spanish lawyer, all in black, in a lofty frame. The calm, strolling footsteps went away along the gallery. He turned the corner. The tapping of his heels echoed in the patio, into whose blackness filtered the first suggestion of the dawn.