

Rainbow's End *A Novel*

By REX BEACH

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

O'Reilly joined in the laughter evoked by this remark. He was quite as tattered as the poorest of Betancourt's common soldiers; his shoes were broken and disreputable; his cotton trousers, snagged by barbed wire and brambles, and soiled by days in the saddle and nights in the grass, were in desperate need of attention. His beard had grown, too, and his skin, where it was exposed, was burnt to a mahogany brown. Certainly there was nothing about his appearance to bespeak his nationality.

The general continued: "I am directed in this letter to help you in some enterprise. Command me, sir."

As briefly as possible Johnnie made known the object of his journey. The officer nodded his comprehension, but as he did so a puzzled expression crossed his face.

"Yes, I reported that Miss Varona had gone into the city—I took some pains to find out. Do you have reason to doubt?"

"Not the least, sir."

"Then—why have you come all this way?"

"I came to find her and to fetch her to her brother."

"But—you don't understand. She is actually inside the lines, in Matanzas—a prisoner."

"Exactly. I intend to go into Matanzas and bring her out."

General Betancourt drew back, astonished. "My dear man!" he exclaimed. "Are you mad?"

O'Reilly smiled faintly. "Quite probably. All lovers are mildly mad, I believe."

"Ah! Lovers! I begin to see. But—how do you mean to go about this—this impossible undertaking?"

"You told me just now that I could pass for a Cuban. Well, I am going to put it to the test. If I once get into the city I shall manage somehow to get out again, and bring her with me."

"Um-m!" The general appraised O'Reilly speculatively. "No doubt you can get in—it is not so difficult to enter, I believe, and especially to one who speaks the language like a native. But the return—I fear you will find that another matter. Matanzas is a place of pestilence, hunger, despair. No one goes there from choice any more, and no one ever comes out."

"So I should imagine." The speaker's careless tone added to General Betancourt's astonishment. "Bless me!" he exclaimed. "What an extraordinary young man! Is it possible that you do not comprehend the terrible conditions?"

A sudden thought struck him and he inquired quickly: "Tell me, you are not by any chance that hero they call El Demonio? I have heard that he is indeed a demon. No? Very well! You say you wish to visit Matanzas, and I am instructed to help you. How can I do so?"

O'Reilly hesitated an instant. "For one thing, I need money. I—I haven't a single peseta."

"You are welcome to the few dollars I possess."

Johnnie expressed his gratitude for this ready assistance. "One thing more," said he. "Will you give my boy, Jacket, a new pair of trousers and send him back to the Orient at the first opportunity?"

"Of course. It is done." The general laid a friendly hand upon O'Reilly's shoulder, saying, gravely: "It would relieve me intensely to send you back with him, for I have fears for the success of your venture. Matanzas is a hell; it has swallowed up thousands of our good countrymen; thousands have died there. I'm afraid you do not realize what risks you are taking."

O'Reilly did not allow this well-meant warning to influence him, nor did he listen to the admonitions of those other Cubans who tried to argue with him out of his purpose, once it became known. On the contrary, he proceeded with his preparations and spent that afternoon in satisfying himself that Rosa had indeed left the Pan de Matanzas before Cob's raid.

Among Betancourt's troops was a man who had been living in the hills at the time Asensio and his family had abandoned their struggle for existence, and to him O'Reilly went. This fellow, it seemed, had remained with his family in the mountains some time after Asensio's departure. It was from him that O'Reilly heard his first authentic report of the atrocities perpetrated by Cob's volunteers. This man had lost his wife, his little son, and all the scanty belongings he possessed. With shaking hands upstretched to heaven, the fellow cursed the author of his misfortunes.

"I live for one thing!" he cried shrilly—"to meet that monster, and to butcher him, as he butchers women and children."

O'Reilly purposely left his most unpleasant task to the last. When his arrangements had been completed and he had acquainted himself as far as possible with the hazards he was likely to encounter, he took Jacket aside and broke the news to him that on the following morning they must part. As he had expected, the boy refused to listen to him. O'Reilly remained firm

and Jacket began to weep copiously. He worked himself up to a hysterical crescendo which threatened to arouse the entire encampment. But O'Reilly was unmoved.

"Be quiet," he told the boy. "I won't let you go with me, and that ends it. It will be hard enough for one man to slip through; two would be sure to fail."

"Those Spaniards will kill you!" Jacket wailed.

"So much the more reason for you to stay here."

At this the boy uttered a louder cry. He stamped his bare feet in a frenzy of disappointment. "You dasent leave me—you dasent!"

"Listen, people are starving in Matanzas; they are sick; they are dying in the streets."

"I don't eat much."

When Johnnie shook his head stubbornly Jacket launched himself into a torrent of profanity the violence of which dried his tears. His vocabulary was surprising. He reviled the Spaniards, O'Reilly, himself, everybody and everything; he leveled anathemas at that woman who had come between him and his beloved benefactor. The latter listened good-naturedly.

"You're a tough kid," he laughed, when Jacket's first rage had worn itself out. "I like you, and I'd take you if I could. But this isn't an enterprise for a boy, and it won't get you anything to keep up this racket."

Jacket next tried the power of argument. He attempted to prove that in a hazardous undertaking of this sort his assistance would be invaluable. He was, so he declared, the one person in all Cuba in every respect qualified to share O'Reilly's perils. To begin with, he was not afraid of Spaniards, or anything else, for that matter—he dismissed the subject of personal courage with a contemptuous shrug. As for cunning, sagacity, prudence, resource, all-around worth, he was, without doubt, unequaled in any country. He was a veritable Spartan, too, when it came to hardship—privation and suffering were almost to his liking. He was discreet—discretion was something he had inherited; he was a diplomat—diplomacy being one of his most unique accomplishments. As for this talk about hunger, O'Reilly need not concern himself in the least on that score, for Jacket was a small eater and could grow fat on a diet of dried leaves. Disease? Bah! It made him laugh. His experience with sickness was wider than most fiescos, and he was a better nurse than Miss Evans would ever be. Jacket did not wish to appear in the least boastful. On the contrary, he was actually too modest, as his friends could attest, but truth compelled him to admit that he was just the man for O'Reilly. He found it impossible to recommend himself too highly; to save his soul he could think of no qualification in which he was lacking and could see no reason why his benefactor would not greatly profit by the free use of his amazing talents. The enterprise was difficult; it would certainly fall without him.

Johnnie remained carefully attentive during this adjuration. He felt no desire even to smile, for the boy's earnestness was touching and it caused the elder man's throat to tighten uncomfortably. Johnnie had not realized before how fond he had become of this quaint youngster. And so, when the little fellow paused hopefully, O'Reilly put an arm around him.

"I'm sure you are everything you say you are, Jacket, and more, too, but you can't go!"

With that Jacket flung off the embrace and, stalking away, seated himself. He took a half-smoked cigar from the pocket of his shirt and lit it, scowling the while at his friend. More than once during the evening O'Reilly detected his sullen, angry eyes upon him.

General Betancourt and several members of his staff were up early the following morning to bid their visitor good-by. In spite of their efforts to make the parting cheerful it was plain that they had but little hope of ever again seeing this foxy-headed American.

Johnnie's spirits were not in the least affected by this ill-concealed pessimism, for, as he told himself, he had money in his pockets and Matanzas was not many miles away. But when he came to part from Jacket he experienced a genuine disappointment. The boy, strangely enough, was almost indifferent to his leaving; he merely extended a limp, dirty hand, and replied to O'Reilly's parting words with a careless "Adios!"

In hurt surprise the former inquired, "Don't we part good friends?"

"Sure!" Jacket shrugged, then turned away.

Jacket was a likable youngster; his devotion was thoroughly unselfish; it had not been easy to wound him. With keener regrets than he cared to acknowledge O'Reilly set out upon his journey, following the guide whom General Betancourt had provided.

It was a lovely morning, sufficiently warm to promise a hot midday; the air was moist and fresh from a recent shower. This being the rainy season, the trails were soft, and where the rich

red Cuban soil was exposed the travelers sank into it as into wet putty. Crossing a rocky ridge, O'Reilly and his guide at last emerged upon an open slope, knee-high in grass and grown up to bottle palms, those queer, distorted trees whose trunks are swollen into the likeness of earthen water jars. Scattered here and there over the meadows were the dead or fallen trunks of another variety, the cabbage palm, the green heart of which had long formed a staple article of diet for the insurgents. Spanish axes had been at work here and not a single tree remained alive. The green floor of the valley farther down was dotted with the other, the royal kind, that monarch of tropic vegetation which lends to the Cuban landscape its peculiar and distinctive beauty.

"Yonder is the camino," said the countryman, pointing into the valley; "it will lead you to the main road; and there—he turned to the northward—is Matanzas. Go with God, and don't drink the well water, which is polluted from the rains." With a smile and a wave of the hand the man turned back and plunged into the jungle.

As O'Reilly descended the slope he realized keenly that he was alone and in hostile territory. The hills and the woods from Pinar del Rio to Oriente were Cuban, or, at most, they were disputed ground. But here in the plains and valleys near the cities Spain was supreme. From this moment on O'Reilly knew he must rely entirely upon himself. The success of his enterprise—his very life—hinged upon his caution, his powers of dissimulation, his ability to pass as a harmless, helpless pacifist. It gave him an unaccustomed thrill, by no means pleasant.

The road, when he came to it, proved to be a deep gutter winding between red clay banks cut by the high wheels of clumsy cane carts. Inasmuch as no

"Come here," commanded the American.

Jacket shook his head. He made a painful attempt to swallow, and when his utterance became more distinct he consigned his idol to a warmer place than Cuba.

"I'm a tough kid," he declared. "Don't get gay on me."

The two parleyed briefly; then, when satisfied that no violence was intended him, the boy sat down to listen. But, as before, neither argument nor appeal had the slightest effect upon him. He denied that he had followed his benefactor; he declared that he was a free agent and at liberty to go where he willed. If it so chanced that his fancy took him to the city of Matanzas at the same time O'Reilly happened to be traveling thither, the circumstance might be put down to the long arm of coincidence. If his company were distasteful to the elder man, O'Reilly was free to wait and follow later; it was a matter of complete indifference to Jacket. He had business in Matanzas and he proposed to attend to it. The boy lied gravely, unblushingly. Nevertheless, he kept a watchful eye upon his hearer.

"Very well," O'Reilly told him finally. "I give in."

Jacket's face instantly lit up. He radiated good humor; he hitched his body closer.

"By—! I get my own way, don't I?" he laughed.

"Indeed you do." O'Reilly laid a hand fondly upon his loyal follower. "And I don't mind telling you that I'm more than half glad of it. I—I was getting lonesome. I didn't know how much I could miss you. But now we must make some plans, we must have an understanding and decide who we are. Let me see—your real name is Narciso."

"Narciso Villar."

"Well, then, I shall be Juan Villar, your brother. Henceforth we shall speak nothing but Spanish. Tell me now, what was our father's name, where was our home, and what are we doing together?"

During the breathless interval before the shower the two sat with their heads together, talking earnestly. As the wind came and the cooling rain began to rattle on the leaves overhead they took up their bundles and set out. The big drops drenched them quickly. Their thin garments clung to them and water streamed down their bodies; overhead the sky was black and rent by vivid streaks of fire, but they plodded onward cheerfully.

Jacket was himself again; he bent his weight against the tempest and lengthened his short strides to O'Reilly's. He tried to whistle, but his teeth chattered and the wind interfered, so he hummed a song, to drive the chill out of his bones and to lighten his benefactor. Now that he was at last accepted as a full partner in this enterprise, it became his duty not only to share its perils, but to lessen its hardships and to yield diversion.

The rain was cold, the briars beside the overgrown path were sharp, and they scratched the boy's bare legs cruelly; his stomach clamored for a companion to that solitary sweet potato, too, but in his breast glowed ardor and pride. Jacket considered himself a fortunate person—a very fortunate person, indeed. Had he not found a brother, and did not that brother love him? There was no doubt about the latter, for O'Reilly's eyes, when he looked down, were friendly and intimate. Here was a man to die for.

The downpour lasted but a short time, when the sun came out and dried the men's clothes; on the whole, it had been refreshing. When evening came the Villar brothers sought refuge in an old sugar mill, or rather in a part of it still standing. They were on the main cañada now, the paved road which links the two main cities of the island, and by the following noon their destination was in sight.

O'Reilly felt a sudden excitement when Matanzas came into view. From this distance the city looked quite as it did when he had left it, except that the blue harbor was almost empty of shipping, while the familiar range of hills that hid the Yumuri—that valley of delight so closely linked in his thoughts with Rosa Varona—seemed to smile at him like an old friend. For the thousandth time he asked himself if he had come in time to find her, or if fate's maddening delays had proved his own and the girl's undoing.

O'Reilly knew that although Matanzas was a prison and a pesthole, a girl like Rosa would suffer in perils infinitely worse than imprisonment or disease. It was a thought he could not bear to dwell upon.

Signs of life began to appear now, the travelers passed small garden patches and occasional cultivated fields; they encountered loaded carts bound into the city, and once they hid themselves while a column of mounted troops went by.

O'Reilly stopped to pass the time of day with a wrinkled cartman whose dejected oxen were resting.

"Going into the city, are you?" the fellow inquired. "Starved out, I suppose. Well, it's as pleasant to starve in one place as another."

Jacket helped himself to a stalk of

cane from the load and began to strip it with his teeth.

"Will the soldiers allow us to enter?" Johnnie inquired.

"Of course. Why not? The old man laughed mirthlessly; then his voice changed. "Go back," he said, "go back and die in the fields. Matanzas stinks of rotting corpses. Go back where the air is clean." He swung his long lash over the oxen, they leaned against the load, and the cart creaked dismally on its way.

It is never difficult to enter a trap, and Matanzas was precisely that. There were soldiers everywhere, but beyond an indifferent challenge at the outer blockhouse, a perfunctory question or two, Narciso and Juan Villar experienced no trouble whatever in passing the lines. Discipline, never strict at best, was extremely lax at the brick fortinas along the roads, and, since these two refugees were too poor to warrant search, they were waved onward by the sentries. They obeyed silently; in aimless bewilderment they shuffled along toward the heart of the city. Almost before they realized it they had run the gantlet and had joined that army of misery, fifteen thousand strong. The hand of Spain had closed over them.

CHAPTER XVII.

Rosa.

"Look!" Jacket clutched at O'Reilly and pointed a shaking finger. "More beggars! Christo! And those little children!" The boy tried to laugh, but his voice cracked nervously. "Are they children, or gourds with legs under them?"

O'Reilly looked, then turned his eyes away. He and Jacket had reached the heart of Matanzas and were facing the public square, the Plaza de la Libertad it was called. Matanzas appeared poor and squalid, depressingly wretched; its streets were foul and the Plaza de la Libertad—grim mockery of a name—was crowded with a throng such as it had never held in O'Reilly's time, a throng of people who were, without exception, gaunt, listless, ragged. There was no afternoon parade of finery, no laughter, no noise; the benches were full, but their occupants were silent, too sick or too weak to move. Nor were there any rumping children. There were, to be sure, vast numbers of under-sized figures in the square, but one needed to look twice to realize that they were not pygmies or wizened little old folks. It was not strange that Jacket had compared them to gourds with legs, for all were naked, and most of them had bodies swollen into the likeness of pods or calabashes. They looked peculiarly grotesque with their spidery legs and thin faces.

O'Reilly passed a damp hand across his eyes. "Just Heaven!" he breathed. "She—she's one of these!"

The reconcentrados overran Matanzas in an unclean swarm; streets and plazas were congested with them, for no attempt was made to confine them to their quarters. Morning brought them streaming down from the suburban slopes where they lived, evening sent them winding back; their days were spent in an aimless search for food. They snatched at crumbs and combed the gutters for crusts. How they managed to exist, whence came the food that kept life in their miserable bodies, was a mystery, even to the citizens of the city; no organized effort had been made to care for them and there was insufficient surplus food for half their number. Yet somehow they lived and lingered on.

At the time of O'Reilly's arrival the sight presented by these innocent victims of war was appalling; it roused in him a dull red rage at the power which had wrought this crime and at the men who permitted it to continue. Spain was a Christian nation, he reflected; she had set up more crosses than any other, and yet beneath them she had butchered more people than all the nations of the earth combined. This monstrous, coldly calculating effort to destroy the entire Cuban people seemed to him the blackest infamy of all, and he wondered if it would be allowed to succeed.

Fortunately for the two friends, General Betancourt's generosity served to relieve them from any immediate danger of starvation. After making a few purchases and eating with the utmost frugality, they began their search. Later they stretched themselves out to sleep on the stones beneath the portales of the railroad station.

They spent a horrid, harrowing night, for now the general distress was brought home to them more poignantly than ever. At dawn they learned that these people were actually dying of neglect. The faint light betrayed the presence of new corpses lying upon the station flagstones. From those still living, groans, sighs, sick mutterings rose until O'Reilly finally dragged his youthful companion out of the place.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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