

ai s A Novel

By REX BEACH

Author of "The Iron Trail," "The Spellers," "Heart of the Sunset," "Etc."

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

"The least, sir."

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

"I came to find her and to fetch her to see 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 thing—this impossible undertaking?"

"You told me just now that I was paid for a Cuban. Well, I mean 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."

"O'm'm!" The general's eyes were wide open.

O'Reilly speculated. "No doubt you can get in—it is not so difficult to enter, I believe, and especially to one who speaks the language like I do. 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. "Hiss me!" he exclaimed. "What an extraordinary young man! It is 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 Demolito?'"

"That is indeed a name. 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 let me have a boy, Jack, 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: 'I would relieve me intensely to send you back with me, but I have no plan 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. He was told he listened to the admonitions of other Cuban boys 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 Rose had indeed left the Pan de Matanzas before Cobo's raid.

Among Betancourt's troops was a man who had been living in the hills at the time Avenzo's family had abandoned their struggle for independence, and to him O'Reilly went. This fellow, it seemed, had remained with his family in the mountains some time after Avenzo's departure. It was from him that O'Reilly heard his first authentic report of the atrocities perpetrated by Cobo's volunteers. This man had lost his wife, his little son and all the scanty belongings he possessed. With shaking hands and a pleading voice, he begged O'Reilly to avenge the deaths of his family, to avenge the deaths of his wife and child, to avenge the deaths of his wife and child.

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frenzy of disappointment. "You don't leave me—you desert!"

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

"I don't eat much."

When Johnnie looked at his head stubbed, he laughed himself into a fit of hysterics.

"You're a tough kid," he laughed, when Jack's first rage had run itself out.

"I like you, and I'll take you with me. It isn't an enterprise for a boy, and it won't get you anything to keep up this racket."

Jack tried the power of argument. He attempted to prove that in a hazardous undertaking of this sort his assistance would be invaluable.

"You're a tough kid," he declared, the Spaniard, "he leveled an anathema at that woman who had come between him and his beloved benefactor. The latter listened good-naturedly.

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in hostile territory. The hills and the woods from Plaza 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 depended very largely upon his caution, his powers of dissimulation, his ability to pass as a harmless, helpless peasant. It gave him an unaccustomed thrill, by no means pleasant.

The road, when he came to it, proved to be a deep rutted highway between red clay banks cut by the heavy wheels of clumsy cane carts. Inasmuch as no crops whatever had been moved over the road during the past season, it was now little more than one sticky, waxy rut. Not a road, not a chimney was in sight; the valley was deserted. Here was a fertile farming country—and yet so living thing, no sound of bells, no voices, no crowing cocks, no lowing cattle. It was depressing to O'Reilly, he felt that he was something menacing and threatening at all.

Toward noon the breeze lessened and it became insufferably hot. A bank of clouds in the east promised a pouring shower, so Johnnie sought the nearest shade to wait for it, and took advantage of the delay to eat his slender lunch. He was meditating upon a sweet potato when a sound at his back caused him to leap to his feet in alarm. He whirled round, uttering an exclamation of amazement. Seated not fifty feet away was a bare-legged boy, similarly engaged in eating a sweet potato, across Jack. His brown cheeks were flushed, his bright, inquisitive eyes were fixed upon O'Reilly from beneath a defiant scowl.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

"You join to let me come along?"

"No, I don't want you," O'Reilly said coolly; "but I don't want you."

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