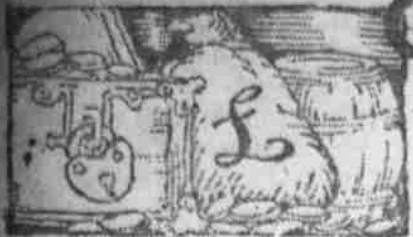


RAINBOW'S END

By REX BEACH



CHAPTER I The Valley of Delight

ALL probability your first view of the valley of the Yumuri will be from the Hermitage of Montserrat, for it is there that the cocheros drive you. Up the winding road they take you, with the bay as your back and the gorge at your right, to the crest of a narrow ridge where the chapel stands. Once there, you overlook the fairest sight in all Christendom—the loveliest valley in the world, as Humboldt called it—for the Yumuri nestles right at your feet, a vale of pure delight, a glimpse of Paradise that bewilders the eye and fills the soul with ecstasy.

It is larger than it seems at first sight; through it meanders the river, coiling and uncoiling, hidden here and there by jungle growths, and seeking final outlet through a cleft in the wall not unlike a crack in the side of a painted bowl. The place seems to have been fashioned as a dwelling for dryads and hamadryads, for nixies and pixies and all the fabled spirits of forest and stream. Fairy hands tinted its steep slopes and carpeted its level floor with the richest of green brocades. Nowhere is there a clash of color; nowhere does a naked hillside or monstrous jut of rock intrude to mar its placid beauty; nowhere can you see a crude, disfiguring mark of man's handiwork—there are only fields and bowers, with an occasional thatched roof faded gray by the sun.

Royal palms, most perfect of trees, are scattered everywhere. They stand alone or in stately groves, their lush fronds drooping like gigantic ostrich plumes, their slim trunks as smooth and regular and white as if turned in a giant lathe and then rubbed with pipe-clay. In all Cuba, island of bewitching vistas, there is no other Yumuri, and in all the wide world, perhaps, there is no valley of moods and aspects so varying. You should see it at evening, all warm and slumberous, all gold and green and purple; or at early dawn, when the mists are fading like pale memories of dreams and the tints are delicate; or, again, during a tempest, when it is a caldron of whirling vapors and when the palm trees bend like corymbs, tossing their arms to the galloping hurricane. But whatever the time of day or the season of the year at which you visit it, the Yumuri will render you wordless with delight, and you will vow that it is the happiest valley men's eyes have ever looked upon.

The Quinta of Esteban Varona

Standing there beside the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat, you will see beyond the cleft through which the river emerges another hill, La Cumbre, from which the view is almost as wonderful, and your driver may tell you about the splendid homes that used to grace its slopes in the golden days when Cuba had an aristocracy. They were classic Roman villas, such as once lined the Via Appia—little palaces, with mosaics and marbles and precious woods imported from Europe, and furnished with the rarest treasures—for in those days the Cuban planters were rich and spent their money lavishly. Melancholy reminders of this splendor exist even now in the shape of a crumbled ruin here and there, a lichened pillar, an occasional porcelain urn in its place atop a vine-grown bit of wall.

Your cochero may point out a certain grove of orange trees, now little more than a rank tangle, and tell you about the quinta of Don Esteban Varona and its hidden treasure; about little Esteban and Rosa, the twins, and about Sebastian, the giant slave, who died in fury, taking with him the secret of the well.

The Spanish Main is rich in tales of treasure trove, for where the Spaniards were most affluent they were least secure, and men were put to strange shifts to protect their fortunes. Certain hoards, like jewels of tragic history, in time assumed a sort of evil personality, not infrequently exercising a bad influence over the lives of those who chanced to fall under their spells. It was as if the money were accursed, for certainly the seekers often came to evil. Of such a character was the Varona treasure. Don Esteban himself was neither better nor worse than other men of his time, and although part of the money he hid was wrung from the toil of slaves and the traffic in their bodies, much of it was clean enough and in time the earth purified it all. Since his acts made so pure an impress and since the treasure he left played so big a part in the destinies of those who came after him, it is well that some account of these matters should be given.

The story, please remember, is an old one; it has been often told and in the telling and retelling it is but natural that a certain glamour, a certain tropical extravagance should attach to it; therefore you should make allowance for some exaggeration, some accretions due to the lapse of time. In the main, however, it is well authenticated and runs parallel to fact.

Don Varona's Family

Don Rosa Varona lived barely long enough to learn that she had given birth to twins. Don Esteban, whom people knew as a grim man, took the blow of his sudden bereavement as became one of his strong fiber. Leaving the priest upon his knees and the doctor busied with the babes, he strode through the house and at into the sunset, followed by the walls of the slave women. From the negro quarters came the sound of other and even louder lamentations, for Dona Rosa had been well loved and the news of her passing away had spread quickly.

Don Esteban was at heart a selfish man, and now, therefore, he felt a sullen, fierce resentment mingled with his grief. What trick was this? he asked himself. What had he done to merit such misfortune? Had he not made rich gifts to the church? Had he not given on foot to the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat with a splendid votive offering—a pair of earrings, a

necklace and a crucifix, all of diamonds that glittered in the sunlight like drops of purest water? Had he not knelt and prayed for his wife's safe delivery and then hung his gifts upon the sacred image, as Loyola had hung up his weapons before that other counterpart of Our Lady? Don Esteban scowled at the memory, for those gems were of the finest, and certainly of a value sufficient to recompense the Virgin for any ordinary miracle. They were worth 5000 pesos at least, he told himself; they represented the price of five slaves—five of his finest girls, schooled in housekeeping and of an age suitable for breeding. An extravagance, truly! Don Esteban knew the value of money as well as anybody, and he swore now that he would give no more to the Church.

The Faithful Sebastian

He looked up from his unhappy musings to find a gigantic barefooted negro standing before him. The slave was middle-aged; his kinky hair was growing gray, but he was of super proportions and the muscles which showed through the rents in his cotton garments were as smooth and supple as those of a stripling. His black face was puckered with grief, and he began:

"Master, is it true that Dona Rosa—?" The fellow choked.

"Yes," Esteban nodded, wearily, "she is dead, Sebastian."

Tears came to Sebastian's eyes and overflowed his cheeks; he stood motionless, striving to voice his sympathy. At length he said:

"She was too good for this world. God was jealous and took her to paradise." The widowed man cried out, angrily: "Paradise! What is this but paradise?" He stared with resentful eyes at the beauty round about him. "See! The Yumuri! Don Esteban flung a long arm outward. "Do you think there is a sight like that in heaven? And yonder—" He turned to the harbor far below, with its fleet of sailing ships resting like a flock of gulls upon a sea of quicksilver. Beyond the bay, twenty miles distant, a range of hazy mountains hid the horizon. Facing to the south, Esteban looked up the full length of the valley of the San Juan, clear to the majestic Pan de Matanzas, a wonderful sight indeed; then his eyes returned, as they always did, to the Yumuri, Valley of Delight. "Paradise indeed!" he muttered. "I gave her everything. She gained nothing by dying."

With a grave thoughtfulness which proved him superior to the ordinary slave, Sebastian replied:

"True! She had all that any woman's heart could desire, but in return for your goodness she gave you children. You have lost her, but you have gained an heir and a beautiful girl baby who will grow to be another Dona Rosa. I grieved as you grieve, once upon a time, for my woman died in childbirth, too. You remember? But my daughter lives, and she has brought sunshine into my old age. That is the purpose of children."

He paused and shifted his weight uncertainly, digging his stiff black toes into the dirt. After a time he said, slowly: "Excellency! Now, about the well—" "Yes. What about it?" Esteban lifted his smoldering eyes.

"Did the Dona Rosa confide her share of the secret to any one? Those priests and those doctors, you know—" "She died without speaking."

"Then it rests between you and me?" "It does, unless you have babbled."

"Master!" Sebastian drew himself up and there was real dignity in his black face.

"Understand, my whole fortune is there—everything, even to the deeds of patent for the plantations. If I thought there was danger of your betraying me I would have your tongue pulled out and your eyes torn from their sockets."

The black man spoke with a simplicity that carried conviction. "You have seen me tested. You know I am faithful. But, master, this secret is a great burden for my old shoulders, and I have been thinking—Times are unsettled, Don Esteban, and death comes without warning. You are known to be the richest man in this province and these government officials are robbers. Suppose—I should be left alone? What then?"

The planter considered for a moment. "They are my countrymen, but a curse on them," he said finally. "Well, when my children are old enough to hold their tongues they will have to be told. If I'm gone you shall be the one to tell them. Now leave me; this is not time to speak of such things."

Hidden Treasure

Sebastian went as noiselessly as he had come. On his way back to his quarters he took the path to the well—the place where most of his time was ordinarily spent. Sebastian had dug this well, and with his own hands he had beautified its surroundings until they were the loveliest on the Varona grounds. The rock for the building of the quinta had been quarried here, and in the center of the resulting depression, grass-grown and flowering now, was the well itself. Its waters seeped from subterranean caverns and filtered, pure and cool, through the porous country rock. Plantain, palm, orange and tamarind trees bordered the hollow; over the rocky walls ran a riot of vines and ferns and ornamental plants.

It was Sebastian's task to keep this place green, and thither he took his way, from force of habit.

"Um-m! Possibly, Don Esteban will miss her for a time and then, I dare say, he will remarry." At the negro's exclamation Cueto cried, "So! And why not? Everybody knows how rich he is. From Oriente to Pinar del Rio the women have heard about his treasure."

"What treasure?" asked Sebastian, after an instant's pause.

Cueto's dark eyes gleamed resentfully at this show of ignorance, but he laughed: "Ho! There's a careful fellow for you! No wonder he trusts you. But do you think I have neither eyes nor ears? My good Sebastian, you know all about that treasure; in fact, you know far more about many things than Don Esteban would care to have you tell. Come now, don't you?"

Sebastian's face was like a mask carved from ebony. "Of what does this treasure consist?" he inquired. "I have never heard about it."

"Of gold, of jewels, of silver bars and precious ornaments." Cueto's head was thrust forward, his nostrils were dilated, his teeth gleamed. "Oh, it is somewhere about, as you very well know! Bah! Don't deny it. I'm no fool. What becomes of the money from the slave girls, eh? And the sugar crops, too? Does it

negroes, the market steadily improved and Esteban reaped a handsome profit from those he had on hand, especially when his crop of young girls matured. His sugar plantations prospered, too, and Pancho Cueto, who managed them, continued to wonder where the money went.

The twins, Esteban and Rosa, developed into healthy children and became the pride of Sebastian and his daughter, into whose care they had been given. As for Evangelina, the young negress, she grew tall and strong and handsome, until she was the finest slave girl in the neighborhood. Whenever Sebastian looked at her he thanked God for his happy circumstances.

Then, one day, Don Esteban Varona remarried, and the Dona Isabel, who had been a famous Habana beauty, came to live at the quinta. The daughter of impoverished parents, she had heard and thought much about the mysterious treasure of La Cumbre.

There followed a period of feasting and entertainment, of music and merry-making. Spanish officials, prominent civilians of Mantanzas and the countryside drove up the hill to welcome Don Esteban's bride. But before the first fervor of his

honey-moon cooled the groom began to fear that he had made a serious mistake. Dona Isabel, he discovered, was both vain and selfish. Not only did she crave luxury and display, but with singular persistence she demanded to know all about her husband's financial affairs.

Now Don Esteban was no longer young; age had soured him with suspicion and when once he saw himself as the victim of a mercenary marriage he turned bitterly against his wife. Her curiosity he sullenly resented, and he unblushingly denied his possession of any considerable wealth. In fact, he tried with malicious ingenuity to make her believe him a poor man. But Isabel was not of the sort to be readily deceived. Finding her arts and coquetries of no avail, she flew into a rage and a furious quarrel ensued—the first of many. For the lady could not rest without knowing all there was to know about the treasure. Avaricious to her fingertips, she itched to weigh those bags of precious metal and yearned to see those jewels burning upon her bosom. Her mercenary mind magnified their value many times and her anger at Don Esteban's obstinacy deepened to a smoldering hatred.

Seeking the Gold

She searched the quinta, of course, whenever she had a chance, but she discovered nothing—with the result that the mystery began to engross her whole thought. She pried into the obscure corners, she questioned the slaves, she lay awake at night listening to Esteban's breathing in the hope of surprising his secret from his dreams. Naturally such a life was trying to the husband, but as his wife's obsession grew his determination to foil her only strengthened. Outwardly, of course, the pair maintained a show of harmony, for they were proud and they occupied a position of some consequence in the community. But their private relations went from bad to worse. At length a time came when they lived in frank enmity; when Isabel never spoke to Esteban except in reproach or anger, and when Esteban unlocked his lips only to taunt his wife with the fact that she had been thwarted despite her cunning.

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Seeking the Gold



Sebastian turned upon his tormentor, a free man save only for the wide iron bracelets and their connecting chain.

CHAPTER II Spanish Gold

THE twins were seven years old when Dona Isabel's schemes bore their first bitter fruit, and the occasion was a particularly uproarious night when Don Esteban entertained a crowd of his Castilian friends. Little Rosa was awakened at a late hour by the laughter and shouts of her father's guests. She was afraid, for there was something strange about the voices, some quality to them which was foreign to the child's experience. Creeping into her brother's room, she awoke him, and together they listened.

Don Mario del Castano was singing a song, the words of which were lost, but which brought a yell of approval from his companions. The twins distinguished the voice of Don Pablo Pesa, too—Don Pablo, whose magnificent black beard had so often excited their admiration. Yes, and there was Colonel Mendoza y Linares, doubtless in his splendid uniform. These gentlemen were well and favorably known to the boy and girl, yet Rosa began to whimper, and when Esteban tried to reassure her his own voice was thin and reedy from fright.

In the midst of their agitation they heard some one weeping; there came a rush of feet down the hallway, and the next instant Evangelina flung herself into the room. A summer moon flooded the chamber with radiance and enabled her to see the two small white figures sitting up in the middle of the bed.

Evangelina fell upon her knees before them. "Little master! Little mistress!" she sobbed. "You will save me, won't you? We love each other, eh? See then, what a crime this is! Say that you will save me!" She was beside herself, and her voice was hoarse and cracked from grief. She wrung her hands, she rocked herself from side to side, she kissed the twins' nightgowns, tugging at them convulsively.

The children were frightened, but they managed to quaver: "What has happened? Who has harmed you?"

"Don Pablo Pesa!" wept the negress. "Your father has sold me to him—lost me at cards. Oh, I shall die! Sebastia won't believe it. He is praying. And Asensio—O God! But what can they do to help me? You alone can save me. You won't let Don Pablo take me away? It would kill me!"

"Wait!" Esteban scrambled out of bed and stood beside his dusky nurse and playmate. "Don't cry any more. I'll tell papa that you don't like Don Pablo."

Rosa followed. "Yes, come along, brother," she cried, shrilly. "We'll tell Don Pablo to go home and leave our Evangelina!"

"My blessed doves! But will they listen to you?" moaned the slave. "Papa does whatever we ask," they assured her, gravely. "If he should growl we'll come back and hide you in the big wardrobe where nobody will ever find you." Then hand in hand, with their long nightgowns lifted to their knees, they pattered out into the hall and down toward the living room, whence came the shouting and the laughter.

An Apparition

Don Mario del Castano, who was facing the door, stopped in the midst of a ribald song to cry: "God be praised! What's this I see?"

The others looked and then burst into merriment, for across the litter of cards and dice and empty glasses they saw a dimpled girl and boy, as like as two peas. They were just out of bed; they were peering through the smoke and blinking like two little owls. Their evident embarrassment amused the guests hugely.

"So! You awaken the household with your songs," some one chided Don Mario. "Two cherubs from heaven," another exclaimed.

And a third cried, "A toast to Esteban's beautiful children."

But the father lurched forward, a frown upon his face. "What is this, my dears?" he inquired, thickly. "Run back to your beds. This is no place for you." "We love Evangelina," piped the twins. "You must not let Don Pablo have her—if you please."

"Evangelina?"

They nodded. "We love her. . . . She plays with us every day. . . . We want her to stay here. . . . She belongs to us."

Accustomed as they were to prompt compliance with their demands, they spoke imperiously; but they had never seen a frown like this upon their father's face, and at his refusal their voices grew squeaky with excitement and uncertainty.

"Go to your rooms, my sweethearts," Don Esteban directed, finally. "We want Evangelina. She belongs to us," they chorused, stubbornly.

CONTINUED
IN MONDAY'S
Evening Ledger