NOSTROMO

A TALE OF THE SEABOARD

By Joseph Conrad

"So foul a sky clears not without a storm." - SHAKESPEARE

PART FIRST THE SILVER OF THE MINE

CHAPTER ONE

In the time of Spanish rule, and for many years afterwards, the town of

Sulaco - the luxuriant beauty of the orange gardens bears witness to its

antiquity - had never been commercially anything more important than a

coasting port with a fairly large local trade in ox-hides and indigo.

The clumsy deep-sea galleons of the conquerors that, needing a brisk

gale to move at all, would lie becalmed, where your modern ship built on

clipper lines forges ahead by the mere flapping of her sails, had been

barred out of Sulaco by the prevailing calms of its vast gulf. Some

harbours of the earth are made difficult of access by the treachery

of sunken rocks and the tempests of their shores. Sulaco had found an

inviolable sanctuary from the temptations of a trading world in

the solemn hush of the deep Golfo Placido as if within an enormous

semi-circular and unroofed temple open to the ocean, with its walls of

lofty mountains hung with the mourning draperies of cloud.

On one side of this broad curve in the straight seaboard of the Republic

of Costaguana, the last spur of the coast range forms an insignificant

cape whose name is Punta Mala. From the middle of the gulf the point of

the land itself is not visible at all; but the shoulder of a steep hill

at the back can be made out faintly like a shadow on the sky.

On the other side, what seems to be an isolated patch of blue mist

floats lightly on the glare of the horizon. This is the peninsula

of Azuera, a wild chaos of sharp rocks and stony levels cut about by

vertical ravines. It lies far out to sea like a rough head of stone

stretched from a green-clad coast at the end of a slender neck of

sand covered with thickets of thorny scrub. Utterly waterless, for the

rainfall runs off at once on all sides into the sea, it has not soil

enough - it is said - to grow a single blade of grass, as if it were

blighted by a curse. The poor, associating by an obscure instinct of

consolation the ideas of evil and wealth, will tell you that it is

deadly because of its forbidden treasures. The common folk of the

neighbourhood, peons of the estancias, vaqueros of the seaboard plains,

tame Indians coming miles to market with a bundle of sugar-cane or a

basket of maize worth about threepence, are well aware that heaps of

shining gold lie in the gloom of the deep precipices cleaving the stony

levels of Azuera. Tradition has it that many adventurers of olden time

had perished in the search. The story goes also that within men's memory

two wandering sailors - Americanos, perhaps, but gringos of some sort for

certain - talked over a gambling, good-for-nothing mozo, and the three

stole a donkey to carry for them a bundle of dry sticks, a water-skin,

and provisions enough to last a few days. Thus accompanied, and with

revolvers at their belts, they had started to chop their way with

machetes through the thorny scrub on the neck of the peninsula.

On the second evening an upright spiral of smoke it could only have

been from their camp-fire was seen for the first time within memory of

man standing up faintly upon the sky above a razor-backed ridge on the

stony head. The crew of a coasting schooner, lying becalmed three miles

off the shore, stared at it with amazement till dark. A negro fisherman,

living in a lonely hut in a little bay near by, had seen the start and

was on the lookout for some sign. He called to his wife just as the

sun was about to set. They had watched the strange portent with envy,

incredulity, and awe.

The impious adventurers gave no other sign. The sailors, the Indian,

and the stolen burro were never seen again. As to the mozo, a Sulaco

man - his wife paid for some masses, and the poor four-footed beast,

being without sin, had been probably permitted to die; but the two

gringos, spectral and alive, are believed to be dwelling to this day

amongst the rocks, under the fatal spell of their success. Their souls

cannot tear themselves away from their bodies mounting guard over the

discovered treasure. They are now rich and hungry and thirsty - a strange

theory of tenacious gringo ghosts suffering in their starved and parched

flesh of defiant heretics, where a Christian would have renounced and

been released.

These, then, are the legendary inhabitants of Azuera guarding its

forbidden wealth; and the shadow on the sky on one side with the round

patch of blue haze blurring the bright skirt of the horizon on the

other, mark the two outermost points of the bend which bears the name of

Golfo Placido, because never a strong wind had been known to blow upon

its waters.

On crossing the imaginary line drawn from Punta Mala to Azuera the

ships from Europe bound to Sulaco lose at once the strong breezes of the

ocean. They become the prey of capricious airs that play with them for

thirty hours at a stretch sometimes. Before them the head of the calm

gulf is filled on most days of the year by a great body of motionless

and opaque clouds. On the rare clear mornings another shadow is cast

upon the sweep of the gulf. The dawn breaks high behind the towering

and serrated wall of the Cordillera, a clear-cut vision of dark peaks

rearing their steep slopes on a lofty pedestal of forest rising from the

very edge of the shore. Amongst them the white head of Higuerota rises

majestically upon the blue. Bare clusters of enormous rocks sprinkle

with tiny black dots the smooth dome of snow.

Then, as the midday sun withdraws from the gulf the shadow of the

mountains, the clouds begin to roll out of the lower valleys. They

swathe in sombre tatters the naked crags of precipices above the wooded

slopes, hide the peaks, smoke in stormy trails across the snows of

Higuerota. The Cordillera is gone from you as if it had dissolved itself

into great piles of grey and black vapours that travel out slowly to

seaward and vanish into thin air all along the front before the blazing

heat of the day. The wasting edge of the cloud-bank always strives for,

but seldom wins, the middle of the gulf. The sun - as the sailors say - is

eating it up. Unless perchance a sombre thunder-head breaks away from

the main body to career all over the gulf till it escapes into the

offing beyond Azuera, where it bursts suddenly into flame and crashes

like a sinster pirate-ship of the air, hove-to above the horizon,

engaging the sea.

At night the body of clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the

whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound

of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly - now

here, now there. Indeed, these cloudy nights are proverbial with the

seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and

sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido - as the saying

is - goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the

seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black

cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her

sails flutter invisible above your head. The eye of God Himself - they

add with grim profanity - could not find out what work a man's hand is

doing in there; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with

impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness.

The shores on the gulf are steep-to all round; three uninhabited islets

basking in the sunshine just outside the cloud veil, and opposite the

entrance to the harbour of Sulaco, bear the name of "The Isabels."

There is the Great Isabel; the Little Isabel, which is round; and

Hermosa, which is the smallest.

That last is no more than a foot high, and about seven paces across,

a mere flat top of a grey rock which smokes like a hot cinder after

a shower, and where no man would care to venture a naked sole before

sunset. On the Little Isabel an old ragged palm, with a thick bulging

trunk rough with spines, a very witch amongst palm trees, rustles a

dismal bunch of dead leaves above the coarse sand. The Great Isabel has

a spring of fresh water issuing from the overgrown side of a ravine.

Resembling an emerald green wedge of land a mile long, and laid flat

upon the sea, it bears two forest trees standing close together, with

a wide spread of shade at the foot of their smooth trunks. A ravine

extending the whole length of the island is full of bushes; and

presenting a deep tangled cleft on the high side spreads itself out on

the other into a shallow depression abutting on a small strip of sandy

shore.

From that low end of the Great Isabel the eye plunges through an opening

two miles away, as abrupt as if chopped with an axe out of the regular

sweep of the coast, right into the harbour of Sulaco. It is an oblong,

lake-like piece of water. On one side the short wooded spurs and valleys

of the Cordillera come down at right angles to the very strand; on

the other the open view of the great Sulaco plain passes into the opal

mystery of great distances overhung by dry haze. The town of Sulaco

itself - tops of walls, a great cupola, gleams of white miradors in a

vast grove of orange trees - lies between the mountains and the plain,

at some little distance from its harbour and out of the direct line of

sight from the sea.

CHAPTER TWO

The only sign of commercial activity within the harbour, visible from

the beach of the Great Isabel, is the square blunt end of the wooden

jetty which the Oceanic Steam Navigation Company the O.S.N. of familiar

speech had thrown over the shallow part of the bay soon after they had

resolved to make of Sulaco one of their ports of call for the Republic

of Costaguana. The State possesses several harbours on its long

seaboard, but except Cayta, an important place, all are either small

and inconvenient inlets in an iron-bound coast - like Esmeralda, for

instance, sixty miles to the south - or else mere open roadsteads exposed

to the winds and fretted by the surf.

Perhaps the very atmospheric conditions which had kept away the

merchant fleets of bygone ages induced the O.S.N. Company to violate the

sanctuary of peace sheltering the calm existence of Sulaco. The variable

airs sporting lightly with the vast semicircle of waters within the head

of Azuera could not baffle the steam power of their excellent fleet.

Year after year the black hulls of their ships had gone up and down

the coast, in and out, past Azuera, past the Isabels, past Punta

Mala - disregarding everything but the tyranny of time. Their names, the

names of all mythology, became the household words of a coast that had

never been ruled by the gods of Olympus. The Juno was known only for

her comfortable cabins amidships, the Saturn for the geniality of her

captain and the painted and gilt luxuriousness of her saloon, whereas

the Ganymede was fitted out mainly for cattle transport, and to be

avoided by coastwise passengers. The humblest Indian in the obscurest

village on the coast was familiar with the Cerberus, a little black

puffer without charm or living accommodation to speak of, whose mission

was to creep inshore along the wooded beaches close to mighty ugly

rocks, stopping obligingly before every cluster of huts to collect

produce, down to three-pound parcels of indiarubber bound in a wrapper

of dry grass.

And as they seldom failed to account for the smallest package, rarely

lost a bullock, and had never drowned a single passenger, the name of

the O.S.N. stood very high for trustworthiness. People declared that

under the Company's care their lives and property were safer on the

water than in their own houses on shore.

The O.S.N.'s superintendent in Sulaco for the whole Costaguana section

of the service was very proud of his Company's standing. He resumed it

in a saying which was very often on his lips, "We never make mistakes."

To the Company's officers it took the form of a severe injunction, "We

must make no mistakes. I'll have no mistakes here, no matter what Smith

may do at his end."

Smith, on whom he had never set eyes in his life, was the other

superintendent of the service, quartered some fifteen hundred miles away

from Sulaco. "Don't talk to me of your Smith."

Then, calming down suddenly, he would dismiss the subject with studied

negligence.

"Smith knows no more of this continent than a baby."

"Our excellent Senor Mitchell" for the business and official world of

Sulaco; "Fussy Joe" for the commanders of the Company's ships, Captain

Joseph Mitchell prided himself on his profound knowledge of men and

things in the country - cosas de Costaguana. Amongst these last he

accounted as most unfavourable to the orderly working of his Company

the frequent changes of government brought about by revolutions of the

military type.

The political atmosphere of the Republic was generally stormy in these

days. The fugitive patriots of the defeated party had the knack of

turning up again on the coast with half a steamer's load of small arms

and ammunition. Such resourcefulness Captain Mitchell considered as

perfectly wonderful in view of their utter destitution at the time of

flight. He had observed that "they never seemed to have enough change

about them to pay for their passage ticket out of the country." And

he could speak with knowledge; for on a memorable occasion he had been

called upon to save the life of a dictator, together with the lives of a

few Sulaco officials - the political chief, the director of the customs,

and the head of police - belonging to an overturned government. Poor

Senor Ribiera such was the dictator's name had come pelting eighty

miles over mountain tracks after the lost battle of Socorro, in the hope

of out-distancing the fatal news - which, of course, he could not manage

to do on a lame mule. The animal, moreover, expired under him at the end

of the Alameda, where the military band plays sometimes in the evenings

between the revolutions. "Sir," Captain Mitchell would pursue with

portentous gravity, "the ill-timed end of that mule attracted attention

to the unfortunate rider. His features were recognized by several

deserters from the Dictatorial army amongst the rascally mob already

engaged in smashing the windows of the Intendencia."

Early on the morning of that day the local authorities of Sulaco had

fled for refuge to the O.S.N. Company's offices, a strong building

near the shore end of the jetty, leaving the town to the mercies of a

revolutionary rabble; and as the Dictator was execrated by the populace

on account of the severe recruitment law his necessities had compelled

him to enforce during the struggle, he stood a good chance of being

torn to pieces. Providentially, Nostromo - invaluable fellow - with some

Italian workmen, imported to work upon the National Central Railway,

was at hand, and managed to snatch him away - for the time at least.

Ultimately, Captain Mitchell succeeded in taking everybody off in his

own gig to one of the Company's steamers - it was the Minerva - just then,

as luck would have it, entering the harbour.

He had to lower these gentlemen at the end of a rope out of a hole in

the wall at the back, while the mob which, pouring out of the town, had

spread itself all along the shore, howled and foamed at the foot of the

building in front. He had to hurry them then the whole length of the

jetty; it had been a desperate dash, neck or nothing - and again it was

Nostromo, a fellow in a thousand, who, at the head, this time, of the

Company's body of lightermen, held the jetty against the rushes of the

rabble, thus giving the fugitives time to reach the gig lying ready

for them at the other end with the Company's flag at the stern. Sticks,

stones, shots flew; knives, too, were thrown. Captain Mitchell exhibited

willingly the long cicatrice of a cut over his left ear and temple, made

by a razor-blade fastened to a stick - a weapon, he explained, very much

in favour with the "worst kind of nigger out here."

Captain Mitchell was a thick, elderly man, wearing high, pointed collars

and short side-whiskers, partial to white waistcoats, and really very

communicative under his air of pompous reserve.

"These gentlemen," he would say, staring with great solemnity, "had

to run like rabbits, sir. I ran like a rabbit myself. Certain forms of

death are - er - distasteful to a - a - er - respectable man. They would have pounded me to death, too. A crazy mob, sir, does not discriminate. Under providence we owed our preservation to my Capataz de Cargadores, as they

called him in the town, a man who, when I discovered his value, sir, was

just the bos'n of an Italian ship, a big Genoese ship, one of the few

European ships that ever came to Sulaco with a general cargo before the

building of the National Central. He left her on account of some very

respectable friends he made here, his own countrymen, but also, I

suppose, to better himself. Sir, I am a pretty good judge of character.

I engaged him to be the foreman of our lightermen, and caretaker of our

jetty. That's all that he was. But without him Senor Ribiera would have

been a dead man. This Nostromo, sir, a man absolutely above reproach,

became the terror of all the thieves in the town. We were infested,

infested, overrun, sir, here at that time by ladrones and matreros,

thieves and murderers from the whole province. On this occasion they

had been flocking into Sulaco for a week past. They had scented the end,

sir. Fifty per cent. of that murdering mob were professional bandits

from the Campo, sir, but there wasn't one that hadn't heard of Nostromo.

As to the town leperos, sir, the sight of his black whiskers and white

teeth was enough for them. They quailed before him, sir. That's what the

force of character will do for you."

It could very well be said that it was Nostromo alone who saved the

lives of these gentlemen. Captain Mitchell, on his part, never left them

till he had seen them collapse, panting, terrified, and exasperated,

but safe, on the luxuriant velvet sofas in the first-class saloon of the

Minerva. To the very last he had been careful to address the ex-Dictator

as "Your Excellency."

"Sir, I could do no other. The man was down - ghastly, livid, one mass of

scratches."