

The Dead Man

(1946)

That a man from the outlying slums of a city like Buenos Aires, that a sorry hoodlum with little else to his credit than a passion for recklessness, should find his way into that wild stretch of horse country between Brazil and Uruguay and become the leader of a band of smugglers, seems on the face of it unbelievable. To those who think so, I'd like to give an account of what happened to Benjamín Otálora, of whom perhaps not a single memory lingers in the neighborhood where he grew up, and who died a fitting death, struck down by a bullet, somewhere on the border of Rio Grande do Sul. Of the details of his adventures I know little; should I ever be given the facts, I shall correct and expand these pages. For the time being, this outline may prove of some use.

Benjamín Otálora, along about 1891, is a strapping young man of nineteen. He has a low forehead, candid blue eyes, and that country-boy appearance that goes with Basque ancestry. A lucky blow with a knife has made clear

to him that he is also brave; his opponent's death causes him no concern, nor does his need to flee the country. The political boss of the district gives him a letter of introduction to a certain Azevedo Bandeira, in Uruguay. Otálora books passage; the crossing is stormy and the ship pitches and creaks. The next day, he wanders the length and breadth of Montevideo, with unacknowledged or perhaps unsuspected homesickness. He does not find Azevedo Bandeira. Getting on toward midnight, in a small saloon out on the northern edge of town, he witnesses a brawl between some cattle drovers. A knife flashes. Otálora has no idea who is in the right or wrong, but the sheer taste of danger lures him, just as cards or music lure other men. In the confusion, he blocks a lunging knife thrust that one off the gauchos aims at a man wearing a rough countryman's poncho and, oddly, the dark derby of a townsman. The man turns out to be Azevedo Bandeira. (As soon as he finds this out, Otálora destroys the letter, preferring to be under no one's obligation.) Azevedo Bandeira, though of stocky build, gives the unaccountable impression of being somehow misshapen. In his large face, which seems always to be too close, are the Jew, the Negro, and the Indian; in his bearing, the tiger and the ape. The scar that cuts across his cheek is one ornament more, like his bristling black moustache.

A fantasy or a mistake born of drunkenness, the fight ends as quickly as it broke out. Otálora takes a drink with the drovers and then goes along with them to an all-night party and after that—the sun high in the sky by now—to a rambling house in the Old Town. Inside, on the bare ground of the last patio, the men lay out their sheepskin saddle blankets to sleep. Dimly, Otálora compares this past night with the night before; here he is, on solid ground now, among friends. A pang of remorse for not missing his Buenos Aires nags at him, however. He sleeps until night-fall, when he is wakened by the same gaucho who, blind drunk, had tried to knife Bandeira. (Otálora recalls that the man has shared the high-spirited night with the rest of

them, and that Bandeira had seated him at his right hand and forced him to go on drinking.) The man says the boss has sent for him. In a kind of office opening into the entrance passage (Otálora has never before seen an entrance with doors opening into it from the sides), Azevedo Bandeira, in the company of an aloof and showy red-haired woman, is waiting for him. Bandeira praises him up and down, offers him a shot of rum, tells him he has the makings of a man of guts, suggests that he go up north with the others to bring back a large cattle herd. Otálora agrees; toward dawn they are on the road, heading for Tacuarembó.

For Otálora a new kind of life opens up, a life of far-flung sunrises and long days in the saddle, reeking of horses. It is an untried and at times unbearable life, but it's already in his blood, for just as the men of certain countries worship and feel the call of the sea, we Argentines in turn (including the man who weaves these symbols) yearn for the boundless plains that ring under a horse's hooves. Otálora has grown up in a neighborhood of teamsters and liverymen. In under a year, he makes himself into a gaucho. He learns to handle a horse, to round up and slaughter cattle, to throw a rope for holding an animal fast or bolas for bringing it down, to fight off sleep, to weather storms and frosts and sun, to drive a herd with whistles and hoots. Only once during this whole apprenticeship does he set eyes on Azevedo Bandeira, but he has him always in mind because to be one of Bandeira's men is to be looked up to and feared, and because after any feat or hard job the gauchos always say Bandeira does it better. Somebody has it that Bandeira was born on the Brazilian side of the Cuareim, in Rio Grande do Sul; this, which should lower him in Otálora's eyes, somehow—with its suggestion of dense forests and of marshes and of inextricable and almost endless distances—only adds to him. Little by little, Otálora comes to realize that Bandeira's interests are many and that chief among them is smuggling. To be a cattle drover is to be a servant; Otálora decides to work himself up to the

level of smuggler. One night, as two of his companions are about to go over the border to bring back a consignment of rum, Otálora picks a fight with one of them, wounds him, and takes his place. He is driven by ambition and also by a dim sense of loyalty. The man (he thinks) will come to find out that I'm worth more than all his Uruguayans put together.

Another year goes by before Otálora sees Montevideo again. They come riding through the outskirts and into the city (which to Otálora now seems enormous); reaching the boss's house, the men prepare to bed down in the last patio. The days pass, and Otálora still has not laid eyes on Bandeira. It is said, in fear, that he is ailing; every afternoon a Negro goes up to Bandeira's room with a kettle and maté. One evening, the job is assigned to Otálora. He feels vaguely humiliated, but at the same time gratified.

The bedroom is bare and dark. There's a balcony that faces the sunset, there's a long table with a shining disarray of riding crops, bullwhips, cartridge belts, firearms, and knives. On the far wall there's a mirror and the glass is faded. Bandeira lies face up, dreaming and muttering in his sleep; the sun's last rays outline his features. The big white bed seems to make him smaller, darker. Otálora notes his graying hair, his exhaustion, his weakness, the deep wrinkles of his years. It angers him being mastered by this old man. He thinks that a single blow would be enough to finish him. At this moment, he glimpses in the mirror that someone has come in. It's the woman with the red hair; she is barefoot and only half-dressed, and looks at him with cold curiosity. Bandeira sits up in bed; while he speaks of business affairs of the past two years and drinks maté after maté, his fingers toy with the woman's braided hair. In the end, he gives Otálora permission to leave.

A few days later, they get orders to head north again. There, in a place that might be anywhere on the face of the endless plains, they come to a forlorn ranch. Not a single tree or a brook. The sun's first and last rays beat down on

it. There are stone fences for the lean longhorn cattle. This rundown set of buildings is called "The Last Sigh."

Sitting around the fire with the ranch hands, Otálora hears that Bandeira will soon be on his way from Montevideo. He asks what for, and someone explains that there's an outsider turned gaucho among them who's giving too many orders. Otálora takes this as a friendly joke and is flattered that the joke can be made. Later on, he finds out that Bandeira has had a falling out with one of the political bosses, who has withdrawn his support. Otálora likes this bit of news.

Crates of rifles arrive; a pitcher and washbasin, both of silver, arrive for the woman's bedroom; intricately figured damask draperies arrive; one morning, from out of the hills, a horseman arrives—a sullen man with a full beard and a poncho. His name is Ulpiano Suárez and he is Azevedo Bandeira's strong-arm man, or bodyguard. He speaks very little and with a thick Brazilian accent. Otálora does not know whether to put down his reserve to unfriendliness, or to contempt, or to mere backwoods manners. He realizes, however, that to carry out the scheme he is hatching he must win the other man's friendship.

Next into Benjamín Otálora's story comes a black-legged bay horse that Azevedo Bandeira brings from the south, and that carries a fine saddle worked with silver and a saddle blanket trimmed with a jaguar skin. This spirited horse is a token of Bandeira's authority and for this reason is coveted by the young man, who comes also—with a desire bordering on spite—to hunger for the woman with the shining hair. The woman, the saddle, and the big bay are attributes or trappings of a man he aspires to bring down.

At this point the story takes another turn. Azevedo Bandeira is skilled in the art of slow intimidation, in the diabolical trickery of leading a man on, step by step, shifting from sincerity to mockery. Otálora decides to apply this ambiguous method to the hard task before him. He decides to replace Azevedo Bandeira, but to take his time over it. During days of shared danger, he gains Suárez'

friendship. He confides his plan to him; Suárez pledges to help. Then a number of things begin happening of which I know only a few. Otálora disobeys Bandeira's orders; he takes to overlooking them, changing them, defying them. The whole world seems to conspire with him, hastening events. One noontime, somewhere around Tacuarembó, there is an exchange of gunfire with a gang from Brazil; Otálora takes Bandeira's place and shouts out orders to the Uruguayans. A bullet hits him in the shoulder, but that afternoon Otálora rides back to "The Last Sigh" on the boss's horse, and that evening some drops of his blood stain the jaguar skin, and that night he sleeps with the woman with the shining hair. Other accounts change the order of these events, denying they happened all in the same day.

Bandeira, nevertheless, remains nominally the boss. He goes on giving orders which are not carried out. Benjamín Otálora leaves him alone, out of mixed reasons of habit and pity.

The closing scene of the story coincides with the commotion of the closing night of the year 1894. On this night, the men of "The Last Sigh" eat freshly slaughtered meat and fall into quarreling over their liquor; someone picks out on the guitar, over and over again, a *milonga* that gives him a lot of trouble. At the head of the table, Otálora, feeling his drink, piles exultation upon exultation, boast upon boast; this dizzying tower is a symbol of his irresistible destiny. Bandeira, silent amid the shouting, lets the night flow noisily on. When the clock strikes twelve, he gets up like a man just remembering he has something to do. He gets up and softly knocks at the woman's door. She opens at once, as though waiting to be called. She steps out barefoot and half-dressed. In an almost feminine, soft-spoken drawl, Bandeira gives her an order.

"Since you and the Argentine care so much for each other," he says, "you're going to kiss him right now in front of everyone."

He adds an obscene detail. The woman tries to resist, but two men have taken her by the arms and fling her upon

Otálora. Brought to tears, she kisses his face and chest, Ulpiano Suárez has his revolver out. Otálora realizes, before dying, that he has been betrayed from the start, that he has been sentenced to death—that love and command and triumph have been accorded him because his companions already thought of him as a dead man, because to Bandeira he already was a dead man.

Suárez, almost in contempt, fires the shot.