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The Policy of Torches: Chapter I

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October 10, 1868 | Cuba | ten years until the peace

On most days, the slave bell woke Señor Céspedes in his bed in the big house beyond the rose garden. This morning, he went to ring the bell himself. For Señor Céspedes, the bell would signal the beginning of his treason.

In the dawn light, he passed slaves at their cook fires, and slaves still sleeping. Through the boiling house door, he saw men and women at an indistinct socializing.

A community of hovels ran from the rose garden near the big house down through slave town the sugarcane fields beyond. A few of La Demajagua's children ran past Céspedes, toward the bell on its scaffold altar. Some limped, their feet scarred by sugarcane stalks sharp as knives. Some in the crowd had faces discolored by burns left by spitting sugar from the boiling house cauldrons. There were others not marked by burns and therefore not marked as slaves. From the better-tended cottages, which formed a buffer between the rose garden and the boiling house, men and women of La Demajagua's free plantation reported for their morning shifts.

Like a saint's day procession, the morning shift left their homes and breakfasts to join the pilgrimage. They stayed far behind the men trailing Céspedes as he strode across his plantation. These men wore the same clothes as Céspedes and all wore the expressions of men preparing to embark on a great and treacherous undertaking. Most of the men were his neighbors, owners of sugar plantations like La Demajagua. They too struggled to eek out a profit in Manzanillo province under the foul imperial taxes.

A ritual gathering was already waiting; the foreman and his freemen overseers ready to begin. The foreman handed him a battered mallet that looked as old as the tarnished bell. Señor Céspedes had rung the bell once before, on the morning of the day he bought La Demajagua

from an old Spaniard with no sons. He had not run it in the five years since. Yet every day at La Demajagua, the foremen signaled when work began, in the sugar mill, in the boiling house, and in the cane fields.

Señor Céspedes had bought La Demajagua with the profits of his law practice, thinking the income of a planter might cover dowries for his daughter, and schoolmasters for his sons. That it had. When he had bought the plantation and the big house, he had not admitted the purchase to his lawyer friends for two months, hiding the truth from everyone but his wife. On his wife Maria, he had practiced the familiar justifications which every planter know by rote. For a long time, she had refused even see La Demajagua, until it felt as if he had carried on some ignominious affair. It seemed everyone knew Carlos Manuel de Céspedes had become a planter.

Céspedes had never changed his politics, yet the modern men of Cuba, his Masonic brothers in the Havana Lodge, their wives, even the sugar merchants, began to treat him like he was a European-born, a *peninsulare*—an aristocrat of the foulest kind. *Peninsulares* were spaniards—in Cuba they held all high offices, made all laws, and controlled nearly all the sugar profits. Most *peninsulares* were either soldiers or slave owners. They sent all the wealth of Cuba back to Spain where they built themselves palaces on the *Douro*, from which they never had to hear their slave bells chime.

Cubans like Céspedes rarely profited from the sugar trade. It had taken long years of planning and saving to buy La Demajagua. The investment had been fiscally wise but morally extracting. He had not known how suffering could leak into the bones of man who himself did not suffer.

Months before he had woken from a terrible nightmare. The liberator of the Americas, Simon Bolivar had ridden through his dream astride a white horse. In the dream, Bolivar had cursed Céspedes as a “son of Spain.” In the dream, Bolivar had spoken with the words of abolitionists and freemasons; familiar arguments he had never thought would be turned against

him. Céspedes remembered following Bolívar in the dream. But while Bolívar's white horse rode easily, the ground beneath Céspedes turned viscous and began to suck him down. Then, all his clothes were aflame, and he had woken tangled in nightclothes with *peninsulare* excuses on his lips. That morning, he had fully given his soul to God, Bolívar and treason.

Only the peninsulares did not see what lay outside their manor house doors, in the shacks and in the fields, and most of all in the boiling houses—those reeking charnel pits for the unredeemed Spanish soul. Even the yankees had settled the issue. Only Cuba kept its eyes fast shut, as it had for the last three hundred years. Yet Cubans abolitionists, lawyers, laborers and coffee-farmers and all their wives and children had no more say in Cuba's governance than did the chattel slave.

Thirty years ago, Simon Bolívar had driven the *peninsulares* from all Spain's possessions in South America. Leaving the new nations of Chile, Peru, and Columbia free from *juntas* of Cadiz. Santo Domingo had followed, and left Cuba the last and richest of Spain's colonies in the new world. It would take a man like Bolívar to dispossess the *peninsulares* of Cuba and her white gold.

The bell rang strong from a single blow of the mallet. The sound diffused among low morning clouds, faintly echoing from low hills on the horizon.

Already the slaves were gathering, streaming from their morning meals, emptying shacks and slipping toward Céspedes through the heavy stalks of sugarcane. He saw many carrying machetes. Last night, the rumor that Céspedes planned rebellion had passed through La Demajagua like the news of a great victory in the field--did they believe he would really do it? In most faces was apprehension, though a few of those tough men who he knew would make the finest soldiers had come prepared.

When the bell had gathered all La Demajagua around him, Señor Céspedes threw the mallet to the ground. The foreman went to retrieve it, but Céspedes told him to leave the mallet

where it lay. Half crouching, the foreman looked at him, confused. When Céspedes spoke next, it was as much to put the foreman at ease than begin an armed insurrection.

In a few mumbled words, Céspedes said that all the slaves of La Demajagua had been set free. His voice rose much above a whisper, the words themselves demanding much from him. The foreman still stared, and someone back in the crowd asked those nearer what Señor Céspedes had said.

“Citizens of Cuba” he addressed them. Murmurings ran through the crowd as he forged on, remembering only half the words he had intended to say.

“Who will cut the sugar?” someone called.

A metal clang interrupted Céspedes’ speech. A negro had thrown his machete down on the mallette. Céspedes’ name was Raoul.

“Let the chinamen cut the sugarcane.” He said.

Eager men yelled their agreement. A woman in the crowd called back that Raoul would need his machete again, if he really wanted to be free. Slave rebellions in Hispaniola had taught the world that liberty was not always worth the price. Céspedes had to convince them Cuba was not Hispaniola. This war would be different.

Céspedes resumed his speech, as the crowd grew louder. “The Captain General has told me I cannot free you. He has told me that by royal decree, it is illegal to free you. Treason, under the king’s law.

“Both of us,” he pointed to himself and then gestured to the crowd around him, “will be citizens of a new Cuba. Today, you are free, as I am.”

The truth was different. The price of sugar had been falling for years. Combined with competition from the new American sugar companies, only cheap slave labor kept the Cuban planters in business, and kept them paying royal taxes. In their last meeting, the governor had reminded Céspedes that without slaves, all plantations would go bankrupt, including La Demajagua. As if he did not know.

The governor general should have known, La Demajagua was already almost bankrupt. The profits every year were pitiful. Like all the sugar planters he knew it seemed that each year La Demajagua provided a smaller profit. Perhaps the sugar trade still boomed in the west where slaves were plentiful, the forests had been cleared, and machines--not donkeys--turned the sugar mills. He couldn't compete with the Western planters. At the end of each grinding season, he had shipped one hundred tons of sugar to the markets in Havana. A planter-freemason he knew had a machine-ground-mill that produced the shocking amount of a thousand tons of milled sugar every grinding season. That planter could pay his taxes and keep something left over, but not Céspedes--not his friends. All his neighbors at La Demajagua suffered, as he did, from the dreadful taxes, which the governor general forced from them at gunpoint. If only the flat ten-percent tax were lifted, perhaps they could replace their donkeys with engines, purchase a to turn a profit

Thinking of what Bolivar might have done, he picked up Raoul's machete and held it above his head.

"If that is the king's law, let us throw the king and his captain general out of Cuba. Join my army as citizens and soldiers, and together we will conquer, for all of Cuba, both liberty and independence." His chest swelled and he thrust the machete toward the clouds, anticipating the glorious war he had begun.

Señor Céspedes whistled and pointed. Men came from the crowd. He told them they were sergeants, and would earn four royals a months, and be given arms, and horses, though they would needs wait for those. The men he'd called forward were the biggest and most reliable, and they he ordered they choose their companies from among the rest. All the men, he promised, arm now hurting and voice raw, would have uniforms and rifles from the stockpiles he had been building beneath the big house.

Céspedes began to feel faint. He had not taken coffee before coming here. He told the foreman that he would have the rank of lieutenant, if he proved himself capable. The delighted foreman seemed to have a marshal bearing—foremen must have all the qualities of lieutenants, it seemed to Céspedes.

Though their new duties satisfied most, as he walked to the big house for coffee and a wash some slaves came dogging after and asked whether they might go. The three young slaves told a story of woe, that if they truly had their freedom they would use it to find their wives and children, who had been sold away to plantations elsewhere on the island. One man had not seen his old woman for four years, he said. They looked so hopeful, and became distraught when Céspedes told them that though *they* might be free, their families were not. He further reminded them of their duty to fight for their freedom, growing terse, and sending them off to their regiments. They obeyed his command like good soldiers, but he watched them slinking back to the others, and wondered if they would really fight, and if they would make soldiers. He hoped they would not run to their wives against his orders, for then they would have to be hanged as deserters to their company. Leaving these thoughts behind him, he left his army, making for the rose garden and the big house to break his fast.

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Maria Céspedes brought trays of cakes and coffee round for the men at the dining table, at last assuaging their hunger, though interrupting Céspedes who had not yet finished holding forth on matters of war. Now he was forced to wait while the food was served out. A great clamor rose when it was announced no ham was to be had, but Maria quieted her guests by saying they could have either bullets or bacon but both would not fit in her larder.

Céspedes let the laughter die, and waited for her bustle to round the door before ordering it closed. As he had hoped, Maria took the humor with her. Now hard-faced men looked at their leader, waiting for his orders as if they were generals and he a major general, as if they were not mostly farmers of tobacco, coffee, and sugar by trade. The rest were an

assortment of ranchers, smallholders, and other sympathetic residents of the Yara district, here to rally around Céspedes and his burgeoning army.

Céspedes drank some coffee, given as a gift by a neighbor, and began to give orders, speaking gently, knowing it would take time for men who had always been his friends to grow accustomed to seeing him as their leader. That they would, he had no doubt. Over tequila the night before, they made him their Captain General of Cuba, and given him a sword. A few had called him “Bolívar,” and then laughed, the tequila making it easy to believe. Céspedes wondered if a year hence men would still call him Bolívar, and wondered if men would laugh when the comparison was made.

The morning passed more slowly than he liked and when the third round of coffees had been drunk and the sun hung above the fields and house slaves—servants now—had opened the windows and let the air and the far-off sounds of new soldiers drilling in the sugar fields, Céspedes slammed his sword onto the tabletop, sending their cups and saucers barking. Eyelids snapped to attention.

“Andres,” he said, “which road will you take?” Andres said that he did not know. At this laxness among his staff, Céspedes flew up from his seat and asked why, then, he had entrusted his family’s safety to Andres. He received blank caution from the man, who reminded himself, was only a coffee farmer and had never considered these military matters.

“You will take the south road through the poppy fields, and when you come to Bayamo, if the Spanish flag no longer flies, you will know we have been victorious. Take no more than three days, Andres.” These words were firm and general-like, and he knew the men who heard it became a little more alert, and knew their Captain General was equal to his title.

“And what if the flag’s still up on the steeple, what should I do then?” Andres said. Céspedes stared down at the table while collecting himself, and responded that as a colonel, Andres should make his own tactical decision.

“With,” he stuck his finger in the air “keeping your ultimate mission foremost--always! Protect my children, make their bodies as precious as diamonds.”

“I imagine that Señora Céspedes,” he continued “will send to god the souls of any Spanish soldier who comes after my children. Now that I think, maybe I should make her colonel?” All of them laughed at his joke, even Andres. Céspedes liked Andres and knew that his farm suffered from the imperial taxes no less than La Demajagua.

That night they sat on his porch as the sun’s last light left through the trees and their cigars filled the air with a fragrant haze. Some of Céspedes’s friends had pled the long day’s ride, the rest had either vanished into the night or sat smoking there on the porch, watching the coming night. The space between the trees became black. Constellations of fires from the slave camp filtered through the trees. For a long time they had been talking war, but then the conversation turned to slavery.

“What happens if I’m a slave” said Pedro, a black smallholder whose father had been, “and I want to walk off.”

“Then that’s your right” Federico the American said. “You’re free.”

“And what if I don’t want to fight?” Pedro said.

“They’ll fight. It’s a fight for their freedom as much as ours.” added Andres.

“Hey, yank” Pedro said “did slave plantations rise against the Confederates?” The question had been directed at Federico, who Céspedes thought might object to being called “yank.”

Federico had been the highest-ranking American in Cuba until a few days ago, when he had quit his job and joined the rebellion. He claimed to have been a union soldier, and said his company had held the ridge at Gettysburg. Céspedes felt lucky to have Federico at La Demajagua. Many other conspirators across Cuba had been gathering veterans to their own bases of power. Céspedes could not afford to have Federico offended.

However Federico only thought a moment, and said that he didn't recall any that any plantations had risen of their own accord, which irritated every man there who knew, as was obvious, that Cuban plantations were nothing like American plantations. Céspedes had a mind to say as much, but thought better of starting an argument.

A tobacco farmer spoke up. "No government we establish in rebellion will be legitimate if there is no general emancipation."

The farmer was a late-arrival to La Demajagua. José Martí, a leading university republican, had recommended him. Though still only a youth, Martí's open letters to like-minded Cubans argued that immediate freedom had to be the highest priority in any settlement with Spain.

"Otherwise," the farmer continued "we only doom ourselves to a national war, like the yanks!" the lawyer stabbed out his nearly-unsmoked cigar he'd been given from Céspedes' personal supply. Céspedes watched him, but did not speak. Neither he nor the farmer would say anything more on the issue.

It was not that Céspedes would renege on his promise. Cuba would be free, for whites and blacks alike, but the price of freedom would be many lives—and if all the lawyers and merchants and planters were dead before the wars were done, who would be left to make a nation?

He thought of Haiti and the half a hundred years of war it had taken to free her from the French. Who rules Haiti now? He thought, but warlords and petty president-kings hiding behind their constitutions. No, Cuba needed a strong man—a man like Bolivar—a father to the nation.

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