THE GOLDEN SERPENT

CIRO ALEGRIA

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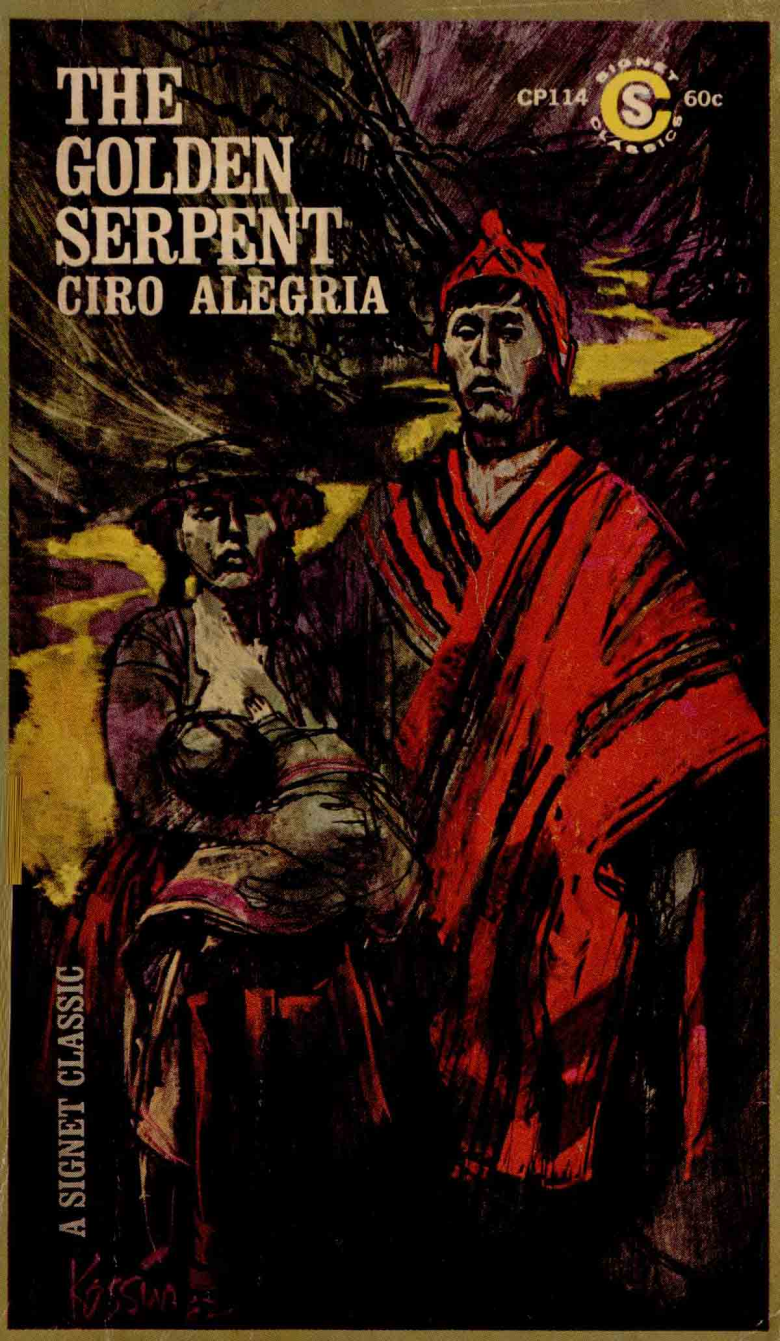

A SIGNET CLASSIC

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ARE DOUBLE-CROSTICS HABIT-FORMING?

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—Oscar Wilde (who might well have said this if he'd known about Double-Crostics)

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The River, the Men, and the Rafts

Where the Marañón breaks through the mountains in a determined forward advance, the Peruvian highland is as ferocious as a mountain lion at bay. It is no place to be caught off guard.

When the river rises it roars against the cliffs, spreading out over the wide banks and covering the pebbled beaches. It rushes along boiling, roaring through gaps and bends, gliding through the open stretches, slimy and yellow with fertile silt whose penetrating smell bespeaks its powerful germinal force. In February, when the river swells to its greatest height, the air all around is filled with a throbbing reverberation, and one is in awe of this turbulent stream and heeds its roar as a personal warning.

We, the *cholos* (half-breeds) of the Marañón, listen to its voice with an alert ear. We know not where it rises or where it ends, this river which would kill us if we tried to measure it with our rafts, but it tells us plainly of its immensity.

Its waters rush by, dragging along masses of debris that reach from one bank to the other. Tree trunks that twist and writhe like bodies; branches, brush, stones, all travel along in a shapeless mass, imprisoning

everything that crosses their path. God help the raft that gets caught in one of these jams! It is dragged along until it is finally flung against a jutting cliff or swallowed up by a whirlpool, along with the jumble of logs, as though it were some worthless bit of trash.

When the boatmen see them coming, black against the water, they row like mad downstream, until they can land on some friendly bank. At times they do not judge the distance well as they cut across and they are caught by one end of the jam. Sometimes, too, if the logs are partly submerged they do not see them until they are almost on them, and then they have to trust to luck. They drop their paddles—those wide oars that raise the water as though they were going to swallow it—cinch their flannel pants tighter and either hop from log to log or dive out of their way until they come up or are lost for good.

The heavy skies of the rainy season unleash wild storms which fall upon and tear at the slopes of the mountains and digging still deeper furrows in the earth, rush down to our Marañón. The river is a world of yellow mud.

We *cholos* whose story this is live in Calemar. We know many other valleys which have been formed where the hills have retreated or been eaten away by the river, but we do not know how many there are upstream or how many there are downstream. We do know that they are all beautiful and they speak to us with their haunting, ancestral voice which is strong like the voice of the river.

The sun sparkles on the red cliffs that form the gorge and rise until it seems as though they were piercing the canopy of the sky, which is sometimes leaden with clouds and sometimes as light and blue as a bit of percale. Below spreads the valley of Calemar and the river does not cut through it but skirts it on one side, lapping the base of the cliffs in front of it. Two footpaths, showing white against the rocks, twisting and turning like a pair of drunken dancers, lead down to this cliff-walled spot.

The paths are narrow but they are all man and beast need to travel these steep familiar mountains whose steps, windings, abysses and passes are known even during the night to well-trained country senses. The road is but a ribbon that marks the way and man and beast follow it calmly, to the sound of pebbles crunching underfoot, in sun, rain or darkness.

One of the paths begins alongside the river, at the foot of the crags, goes panting part way up a yellow slope where leafy *pate* trees grow, and loses itself in the shadows of a gap between the hills. It is that way that strangers come to us and we go to the fairs of Huamachuco and Cajabamba, taking coca to sell there, or just for the fun. We of the valley are rovers by nature, perhaps because the river—a new God—fashioned us out of the water and clay of the world.

The other comes down from the highlands of Bambamarca, along the gap of a ravine, whose waters sing as they sparkle under the cliffs, and are in as much of a hurry to reach the Marañón as the road itself. Both disappear amidst the shady foliage of the valley, the path merging with a lane lined with plum trees, while the water runs into the flumes which water our gardens and give us our drinking water. Down this road come the Indians who whimper over their mosquito bites and think they hear snakes crawling all night long, as though they had spread their blankets over a snake hole. They come to trade potatoes, *ollucas,* or the other things they raise in the highlands for coca, red pepper, bananas and the many fruits this place abounds in.

They do not eat mangos, plums or guavas, because they think they give them malaria. In spite of this, and though they merely come here and go right back, they get the chills and fevers and die shivering like dogs in the wind in their huts which tremble at the blasts of the highland gales. This is not a land of Indians, and only a few have managed to acclimate themselves. To the Indians the valley is like a feverish agitation and to us half-breeds, the loneliness and the silence of the

highlands make our breasts ache. Here we flourish like the green bay tree.

Life is beautiful here. Even death nourishes life in its bosom. In the cemetery, which rests behind a slope from which a little church looks out upon the valley with the single eye of its white belfry, the crosses can hardly stretch out their arms, such is their voluptuous abandon. They are shaded by orange trees which are laden with deliciously sweet fruit. That is what death is like here. And when the river swallows someone, it does not matter. We know that it is our enemy, and there is an old song which shows that we enjoy the risks we take:

River Marañón, let me cross.
You are strong and powerful,
You never forgive.
River Marañón, I have to cross.
You have your waters,
I, my heart.

But life always triumphs. Man is like the river, deep, having his ups and downs, but always stout-hearted. The earth rejoices in the abundance of its fruits, and nature is a riot of color, all its rich shades of green contrasting with the bright red of the rough crags and the blue and milky white of the rocks and the sand of the banks.

Coca fields, banana and yucca plantings grow in the shadow of alligator pear, guava, orange and mango trees, through which the wind soughs voluptuously, spreading the fertile pollen.

The trees entwine and sway in an unending dance. Hundreds of birds, drunk with life, sing in the shade of the groves, and farther off beside the cliffs under the gold of the sun are the pasture fields where the horses and donkeys that carry our loads fatten. The light glistens on their sleek backs and their pulsing veins stand out in ramiform design on their legs. Every whinny is a hymn of rejoicing.

The houses, of woven-reed walls and banana frond roofs, drowse among the trees beside the gardens. They stand straight for they are built around slender *sinamomo* poles. Out of them come the *cholos,* with spade, pick or axe in hand, on their way to some task, or with only the lime gourd, to stretch out and do nothing as they chew their coca under a mango or a friendly cedar while the air shimmers in the sun.

For it must be known that the tree our axes always spare is the cedar, and strangers gaze in openmouthed amazement at the abundance of them. Once in a while somebody in a good humor cuts one down and, with an adze, hacks out a little table or a bench. But most frequently they are to be found standing, spreading their broad shade over houses and hills, paths and flumes, and, naturally, over any person who seeks it.

The most highly prized tree is the balsa. Ash gray in color, this favorite grows at a snail's pace and belongs to the owner of the place where it grows. Who ever heard of fighting over an alligator pear or an orange tree, or even a cedar? Nobody. But a balsa tree is a different matter. There have been serious fights, with knife play and blood. Once the *cholo* Pablo killed Martín for having cut down a balsa tree of his while he was away. Pablo came back from town, missed his tree, and began to ask questions. He went straight over to see Martín who was sitting at the door of his cabin.

"Who cut down my tree?"

And the *cholo* Martín, looking as innocent as a lamb, smiled: "Did someone cut it down?"

Pablo tightened his belt, getting ready to fight, and answered: "Of course somebody cut it down. It didn't walk off by itself."

And Martín, chewing his coca as if nothing had happened: "Now, who knows but what maybe that tree did walk off by itself."

Then Pablo lost his head and whipped out his knife and threw himself at Martín. Just one blow in the breast. He didn't even have time to say *"Ay."* Four years now Martín has been dead.

The balsa trees are getting scarcer every day. There are still a few and their owners keep loving watch over them, but they make us wait while they grow. If not for them, how would we cross the Marañón? By joining them together we make our square rafts which cross the river until they rot or are swept away by it. The stories they could tell!

Up the river there is a valley called Shicún where many balsa trees grow. Their owners do a good business building rafts and those who buy them bring them down the river. We men from Calemar have often gone to Shicún, but not all of us have come back.

What a feeble little structure, the raft, poised upon the roaring waters as on danger itself. It carries the life of the man of the Marañón valleys on it, and he stakes it as on the toss of a coin.

2

Old Matías's Story

It was the last days of March and the level of the river was falling. One day we brought a stranger across without much trouble. The young fellow wore boots, a silk handkerchief at his neck, and a broad-brimmed felt hat. The elegance of his attire contrasted sharply with the homely garments we use in the valley: straw hat, homespun cotton shirt, coarse flannel pants, heavy shoes or flapping sandals, and sometimes a big red bandanna around our neck to protect it from the mustard plaster of the sun. He was riding a big, fine sorrel, but it was strange to our part of the country and we had to tow it behind a raft by a rope. The saddle outfit was bright with silver trimming, like the rider's spurs and revolver, which he wore in a holster hung from his belt.

The gentleman was white, tall, and his glance was keen and sparkling. He was as thin as a reed and looked as though he might suddenly snap at the waist. His soft clear voice was accompanied by polite gestures of the hands. One had only to look at him to see that he was not from that part of the country where the men are squat like rocks and talk in a high thundering voice suited to the broad open spaces or to dialogue with crags.

The stranger was staying at the house of old Matías, the largest in all the valley, and was putting up his mosquito netting on the porch. The old man watched

him as he put the white canopy into place, and finally he asked him: "What might your name be and what have you come to do here?"

The young man answered politely enough, although an ironic smile showed at the corners of his thin lips: "Osvaldo Martínez de Calderón, at your orders, and I have come to study this part of the country."

Then he went on to explain that he came from Lima, that he was an engineer, who his parents were, and that he was trying to organize a company to develop the natural resources of the region. The old man scratched the back of his head, pushing his straw hat down over one eye, pursed his mouth, squinted up his eyes. It was evident that he wanted to make a joke or an objection of some sort, but all he said was: "You are welcome in this house, young man, and I wish you good luck!"

Don Matías Romero lives with his wife, Doña Melcha, who is as old as he, and their son Rogelio. Arturo Romero lives in a house a little way off, for he has been married for some time. The old man's house has two rooms and a porch, like the good house it is. The wind rustles through the thatch of the roof, and fans its wings against the reed walls of the house, bringing relief from the never-ending sultriness of these valleys.

That afternoon I went to the old man's house to see the newcomer and to chat a while. At the end of the porch Rogelio was stretched out in his bunk while the stranger, Don Matías and Arturo were sitting on homemade cedar stools beside the door.

"Come in, man . . . come in," the friendly voice of the old man called out.

There were many wrinkles woven into his and Doña Melcha's dark faces, but their hearts were stout. Graying chin whiskers, like a goat's, gave the old man a roguish look. Arturo was a grown man, as the black bristles which stood out over his upper lip bore witness. Roge's face was covered with fuzz like a green peach; here and there a whisker stood out like a maguey on the plain.

A stranger from so far away—where in the devil is

that Lima they talk so much about?—is a novelty, and we started to talk about many things. The afternoon was coming to a close and the heat was damp and oppressive. A smell of plowed earth floated in the air and the crickets and locusts sang. From an orange tree golden balls dropped softly and in the top of an *arabisco* a shimmering blue flock of turtle-doves cooed. Old Melcha stood cooking over the fireplace built at the foot of a mango tree that grows beside the door and the smell which reached us was a promise of the good treatment the guest was to receive. We chewed coca and smoked the fine cigarettes which the newcomer gave us. He answered our questions quickly and, on the other hand, seemed astonished at everything he saw. We had to explain even what our lime gourds were, and that we used them to carry lime to chew with our coca, and he carefully examined mine which had a carved horn rim and a cover of the same with a little grinning monkey squatting on it. He took off the cover and when he tried the point of the wire on the back of his it stuck him. We laughed and he turned the color of a red pepper.

There was no letup in the stranger's questions and Don Matías gave his tongue free rein. The old man was one of those who never got tired of talking about his own region.

"What was the flood like, sir? First thing it carried away half a yucca field and two rafts which were down below, where we build them, pulled up at a place where the water had never reached since the times old Julián, God rest his soul, used to tell about."

"It was bad, wasn't it?" asked the stranger.

"There hasn't been anything like it in years, sir. Don Julián has been dead these ten years," he added.

"Yes, indeed." And he went on: "The only raft left was Rogelio's, his"—and he pointed to his son who went on chewing his coca—"and the boy had built it without half trying, out of poor poles he had got down over the cliffs on the other side. It is so little, as you've probably seen, that it looks like a handful of brush floating

around on the water The worst of it was that people came down and stopped along the other shore after walking so many miles in the hope of getting across. The most plaguesome of all were the ones from Celendín. Those buggers! To sell the hats they make those rascals go around everywhere even in the worst of the rainy season. There were cattle dealers, also, and important people, and sometimes Indians, too. They all waited there for us to ferry them across. What people! At night they would light the fires to cook their food at the foot of some cliff that sloped back like a cave. And all day long they would be shouting: 'Come take us across . . . take us across.' And the river roaring and foaming and rising like it was bewitched."

"A lot of water, eh?" the stranger inquired again.

"A plague of it, sir. It flooded everything. When you came across you saw those rocks with a black crust on top all cracked with the sun? Well, those were all covered by the water which left that deposit on them. And the folks on the other side shouting their heads off, the way I told you: 'Booatmeen . . . come over, booatmeen.' And, of course, what the devil, we are boatmen and we have to bring the people across even though they only pay eighty centavos apiece. So we started out on Roge's little raft, using two paddles on each side, rowing as hard as we could. We set out way up the river so as to come out at the foot of La Repisa, that flat stone that sticks way out now, where we used to tie our boats up. We got there, wet with sweat, and yelled to them to catch the rope we were going to throw them. Everybody wanted to get on, but when the water came up to our ankles we said that was all and we'd have to make another trip for the rest. The peddlers tied their packs on their backs to keep their wares dry. We were going to come out way below because of the devilish current that did as it pleased with the paddles."

"It was like sticking them into thick mud," observed Arturo, breaking the silence of his coca chewing.

"Afterwards," went on Don Matías, "they had to pull