

THE MATADOR

A NOVEL

BY

VINCENT BLASCO IBAÑEZ

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

By MRS. W. A. GILLESPIE



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CHAPTER I.

JUAN GALLARDO breakfasted early, as was his custom on the days of a bull-fight. He only partook of a little roast meat. Wine he did not touch: the bottle remained unopened before him. He had to keep himself steady. He drank two cups of strong black coffee, and then, lighting an enormous cigar, sat with his elbows resting on the table and his chin on his hands, watching with drowsy eyes the guests who, little by little, began to fill the dining-room.

For several years, ever since he had been recognized as a master of his profession in the bull-ring of Madrid, he had been faithful to this hotel in the Calle de Alcala, where the proprietors treated him as one of the family, and waiters, porters, kitchen scullions, and old chambermaids all adored him as the glory of the establishment.

There also had he stayed many days, swathed in bandages, in a dense atmosphere of iodoform and cigar smoke, as the result of two bad gorings; but

these evil memories had not made much impression. With his Southern superstition and continual exposure to danger he had come to believe that this hotel was a lucky one, and that as long as he lodged there no harm would happen to him. The risks of his profession he had to take, a tear in his clothes perhaps, or even a gash in his flesh, but nothing to make him fall for ever, as so many of his comrades had fallen. The recollection of these tragedies disturbed his happiest hours.

On these days, after his early breakfast, he enjoyed sitting in the dining-room watching the movements of the travellers, foreigners or people from distant provinces, who passed him by with uninterested faces and without a glance, but who turned with curiosity on hearing from the servants that the handsome young fellow with clean-shaven face and black eyes, dressed like a gentleman, was Juan Gallardo, the famous matador, called familiarly by everybody "El Gallardo."

In this atmosphere of curiosity he whiled away the wearisome wait until it was time to go to the arena. How long the time seemed! Those hours of uncertainty, in which vague fears rose from the depths of his soul, making him doubtful of himself, were the most painful in his profession. He did not care to go out into the street—he thought of the fatigues of the bull-fight and the necessity of keeping himself fresh and agile. Nor could he amuse himself with the pleasures of the table, on account of the necessity of eating little and early, so as to arrive in the arena free from the heaviness of digestion.

He remained at the head of the table, his face between his hands, and a cloud of perfumed smoke before his eyes, which he turned from time to time with a self-satisfied air in the direction of some ladies who were watching the famous toreador with marked interest.

His vanity as an idol of the populace made him read praises and flatteries in those glances. They evidently thought him spruce and elegant, and he, forgetting his anxieties, with the instinct of a man accustomed to adopt a proud bearing before the public, drew himself up, dusted the ashes of his cigar from his coat sleeves with a flick, and adjusted the ring which, set with an enormous brilliant, covered the whole joint of one finger, and from which flashed a perfect rainbow of colours as if its depths, clear as a drop of water, were burning with magic fires.

His eyes travelled complaisantly over his own person, admiring his well-cut suit, the cap which he usually wore about the hotel now thrown on a chair close by, the fine gold chain which crossed the upper part of his waistcoat from pocket to pocket, the pearl in his cravat, which seemed to light up the swarthy colour of his face with its milky light, and his Russia leather shoes, displaying effeminate open-work silk socks between the instep and the turned-up trouser.

An atmosphere of English scents, sweet and vague, but used in profusion, emanated from his clothes and from the black, glossy waves of hair which he wore curled on his temples, and he assumed a swaggering air before this feminine curiosity. For a toreador he

was not bad. He felt satisfied with his appearance. Where would you find a man more distinguished or more attractive to women?

But suddenly his preoccupation reappeared, the fire of his eyes was quenched, his chin again sank on his hand, and he puffed hard at his cigar.

His gaze lost itself in a cloud of smoke. He thought with impatience of the twilight hours, longing for them to come as soon as possible,—of his return from the arena, hot and tired, but with the relief of danger overcome, his appetites awakened, a wild desire for pleasure, and the certainty of a few days of safety and rest. If Providence still protected him as so many times before, he would dine with the appetite of his former indigent days, he would drink his fill too, and would then go in search of a music-hall singer whom he had seen during one of his journeys, without, however, having been able to follow up the acquaintance. In this life of perpetual movement, rushing from one end of the Peninsula to the other, he never had time for anything.

Several enthusiastic friends who, before going home to breakfast, wished to see the champion, had by this time entered the dining-room. They were old patrons of the bull-ring, anxious to form a small coterie and to have an idol. They had made the young Gallardo "their own matador," giving him sage advice, and recalling at every turn their old adoration for Lagartijo or Frascuelo. They addressed him as thou with patronizing familiarity, and he, when he answered them, placed the respectful *don* before their names, with that traditional separation

of classes which still exists between a professional riser from a social substratum and his admirers.

These people joined to their enthusiasm their memories of past times, in order to impress the young champion with the superiority of their years and experience. They extolled the old arena of Madrid ; and drawing nearer to the present times, they trembled with excitement as they remembered Frascuelo, commonly called the Negro, because he fought in black clothes.

"If you could only have seen him ! . . . But probably you and those of your day were not yet born."

Other enthusiasts kept coming into the dining-room, men of wretched appearance and hungry faces, obscure reporters of papers only known to the bull-fighters whom they honoured with their praise or censure : people of problematic profession who appeared as soon as the news of Gallardo's arrival got about, besieging him with flatteries and requests for tickets. The general enthusiasm permitted them to mix with the other gentlemen, rich merchants and public functionaries, who discussed bull-fighting affairs with them hotly without being troubled by their beggarly appearance.

All of them, on seeing the champion, embraced him or clasped his hand, to a running accompaniment of questions and exclamations :

"Juanillo ! . . . How is Carmen ?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"And your mother, the Señora Angustias ?"

"Famous, thanks. She is at La Rinconada."

"And your sister and the little nephews?"

"In good health, thanks."

"And that ridiculous fellow your brother-in-law?"

"Well, also. As great a talker as ever."

Juan then turned the tables on the questioner, of whose life, beyond his love for bull-fighting, he was completely ignorant:

"And your own family? Are they also quite well? . . . Come along, I am glad to meet you. Sit down and have something."

Next he enquired about the looks of the bulls with which he was going to fight in a few hours' time, because all these friends had just come from the arena, after seeing the separation and boxing of the animals, and with professional curiosity he asked for news from the *Café Inglés*, where many of the sportsmen foregathered.

It was the first bull-fight of the Spring season, and Gallardo's enthusiastic admirers had great hopes of him as they called to mind all the articles they had read in the papers, describing his recent triumphs in other arenas in Spain. He had more engagements than any other professional. Since the Easter bull-fight at Seville, the first important event in the year, Gallardo had gone from place to place killing bulls. Later on, when August and September came round, he would have to spend his nights in the train and his afternoons in the arena, with scarcely breathing time between them. His agent in Seville was nearly frantic—overwhelmed with letters and telegrams, and not knowing how to fit so many requests for engagements into the exigencies of time.

The evening before this he had fought at Ciudad Real and, still in his splendid dress, had thrown himself into the train in order to arrive in Madrid in the morning. He had spent a wakeful night, only sleeping by snatches, boxed up in the small sitting accommodation that the other passengers, by squeezing themselves together, managed to leave for the man who was to risk his life on the following day.

The enthusiasts admired his physical endurance and the daring courage with which he threw himself on the bull at the moment of killing it. "Let us see what you can do this afternoon," they said with the fervour of zealots; "your backers expect great things from you. You will lower the *moña* * of many of your rivals. Let us see you as dashing here as in Seville!"

His admirers dispersed to their breakfasts at home in order to go early to the contest. Gallardo, finding himself alone, was making his way up to his room, impelled by the nervous restlessness which overpowered him, when a man holding two children by the hand pushed open the glass doors of the dining-room, regardless of the servant's enquiries as to his business. He smiled seraphically when he saw the bull-fighter and advanced, with his eyes fixed on him, dragging the children along and scarcely noticing where he placed his feet. Gallardo recognized him. "How are you, comrade?"

* A knot of hair, dressed with ribbons, worn at the back of the head by bull-fighters, principally to lessen the shock of a fall. The *moña* was only "lowered" when a bull-fighter retired finally from the ring, either on account of age or inefficiency.

Then began all the usual questions as to the welfare of the family, after which the man turned to his children saying solemnly :

" Here he is. You are always asking to see him. He's exactly like his portraits, isn't he ? "

The two mites stared religiously at the hero whose portrait they had so often seen on the prints which adorned the walls of their poor little home, a supernatural being whose exploits and wealth had been their chief admiration ever since they had begun to understand mundane matters.

" Juanillo, kiss your godfather's hand," and the younger of the two rubbed a red cheek against the hero's hand, a cheek newly polished by his mother in view of this visit.

Gallardo caressed his head abstractedly. This was one of the numerous godchildren he had about Spain. Enthusiasts forced him to stand godfather to their children, thinking in this way to secure their future. To have to appear at baptisms was one of the penalties of his fame. This particular godson reminded him of bad times at the beginning of his career, and he felt grateful to the father for the confidence he had placed in him at a time when others were still doubtful of his merits.

" And how about your business, comrade ? " enquired Gallardo, " is it going on better ? "

His admirer shrugged his shoulders. He was getting a livelihood, thanks to his dealings in the barley market—just getting a livelihood, nothing more.

Gallardo looked compassionately at his threadbare Sunday-best clothes.

"Would you like to see the bull-fight? Well, go up to my room and tell Garabato to give you a ticket. . . . Good-bye, my dear fellow. Here's a trifle to buy yourselves some little thing," and while the little godson again kissed his right hand, with his other hand the matador gave each child a couple of silver dollars.

The father dragged away his offspring with many grateful excuses, though he did not succeed in making clear, in his very confused thanks, whether his delight was for the present to the children, or for the ticket for the bull-fight which the champion's servant would give him.

Gallardo waited for some time so as not to meet his admirer and the children in his room. Then he looked at his watch. Only one o'clock! What a long time it still was till the bull-fight!

As he came out of the dining-room and turned towards the stairs, a woman wrapped in an old cloak came out of the hall-porter's office, barring his way with determined familiarity, quite regardless of the servants' expostulations.

"Juaniyo! Juan! Don't you know me? I am the mother of poor Lechuguero."

Gallardo smiled at this little dark wizened woman, verbose and vehement, with eyes burning like live coals,—the eyes of a witch. At the same time, knowing what would be the outcome of her volubility, he raised his hand to his waistcoat pocket.

"Misery, my son! Poverty and affliction! When I heard you were bull-fighting to-day I said, 'I will go and see Juaniyo: he will remember the mother of

his poor comrade.' How smart you are, gipsy! All the women are crazy after you, you rascal! . . . I am very badly off, my son. I have not even a shift, and nothing has entered my mouth to-day but a little ainsette. . . . Ah! If only my poor son were alive! You remember Pepiyo? Do you remember the afternoon on which he died? . . ."

Gallardo put a dollar into her dry hand and did his best to escape from her volubility, which by this time was showing signs of imminent tears.

Cursed witch! Why did she come and remind him, on the day of a bull-fight, of poor Lechuguero, the companion of his early years, whom he had seen killed almost instantaneously, gored to the heart, in the arena of Lebrija, when the two were bull-fighting as novices? Foul hag of evil omen!

He thrust her aside, but she, flitting from sorrow to joy with the inconsequence of a bird, broke out into enthusiastic praises of the brave boys, the good bull-fighters who carried away the money of the public and the hearts of the women.

"You deserve to have the Queen, my beauty! The Señora Carmen will have to keep her eyes wide open. Some fine day a witch will steal and keep you. . . . Can't you give me a ticket for this afternoon, Juaniyo? I am bursting with longing to see you kill!"

The old woman's shrill voice and noisy cajoleries diverted the amused attention of the hotel servants and enabled a number of inquisitive idlers and beggars who, attracted by the presence of the bull-fighter, had collected outside the entrance, to break

through the strict supervision that was usually maintained at the doors.

Heedless of the hotel servants, an irruption of loafers, ne'er-do-wells and newspaper-sellers burst into the hall.

Ragamuffins, with bundles of papers under their arms, flourished their caps and greeted Gallardo with boisterous familiarity :

“ El Gallardo ! Bravo ! El Gallardo ! Long live the brave ! ”

The more daring seized his hand, shaking it roughly and pulling it about in their desire to keep the longest possible contact with this national hero, whose portraits they had all seen in every paper ; and then, to give their companions a chance of sharing their triumph, they shouted, “ Shake his hand. He won't be offended ! He's a real good sort.” Their devotion made them almost kneel before the matador.

There were also other admirers, just as insistent, with unkempt beards and clothes that had been fashionable in the days of their youth, who shuffled round their idol in boots that had seen better days. They swept their greasy sombreros towards him, spoke in a low voice and called him *Don Juan*, in order to emphasize the difference between themselves and the rest of that irreverent, excited crowd. Some of them drew attention to their poverty and asked for a small donation ; others, with more impertinence begged, as his followers, for a ticket for the bull-fight,—fully intending to sell it immediately.

Gallardo defended himself laughingly against this avalanche which jostled and overwhelmed him, and from which the hotel servants, who were bewildered at the excitement aroused by his popularity, were quite unable to save him.

He searched through all his pockets, distributing silver coins broadcast among the greedy hands held out to clutch them.

"There is no more! The fuel is finished! Leave me alone, my friends!"

Pretending to be annoyed by this popularity, which in fact flattered him greatly, he suddenly opened a way through them with his muscular athletic arms, and ran upstairs, bounding up the steps with the lightness of a wrestler, while the servants, freed from the restraint of his presence, pushed the crowd towards the door and swept them into the street.

Gallardo passed the room occupied by his servant Garabato, and saw him through the half-open door, busy amid trunks and boxes, preparing his master's clothes for the bull-fight.

On finding himself alone in his own room, the happy excitement caused by the avalanche of admirers vanished at once. The bad moments of fighting days returned, the anxiety of those last hours before going to the arena to face fierce bulls of Miura and a Madrid audience. The danger, which when facing him seemed to intoxicate him and increase his daring, was anguish to him when alone, —something supernatural, fearful and intimidating from its very uncertainty.