

THE MOB

BY

VICENTE BLASCO IBAÑEZ



Translated from the Spanish

BY

MARIANO JOAQUIN LORENTE

G. H. Klat & Co., Ltd., Singapore and Penang.

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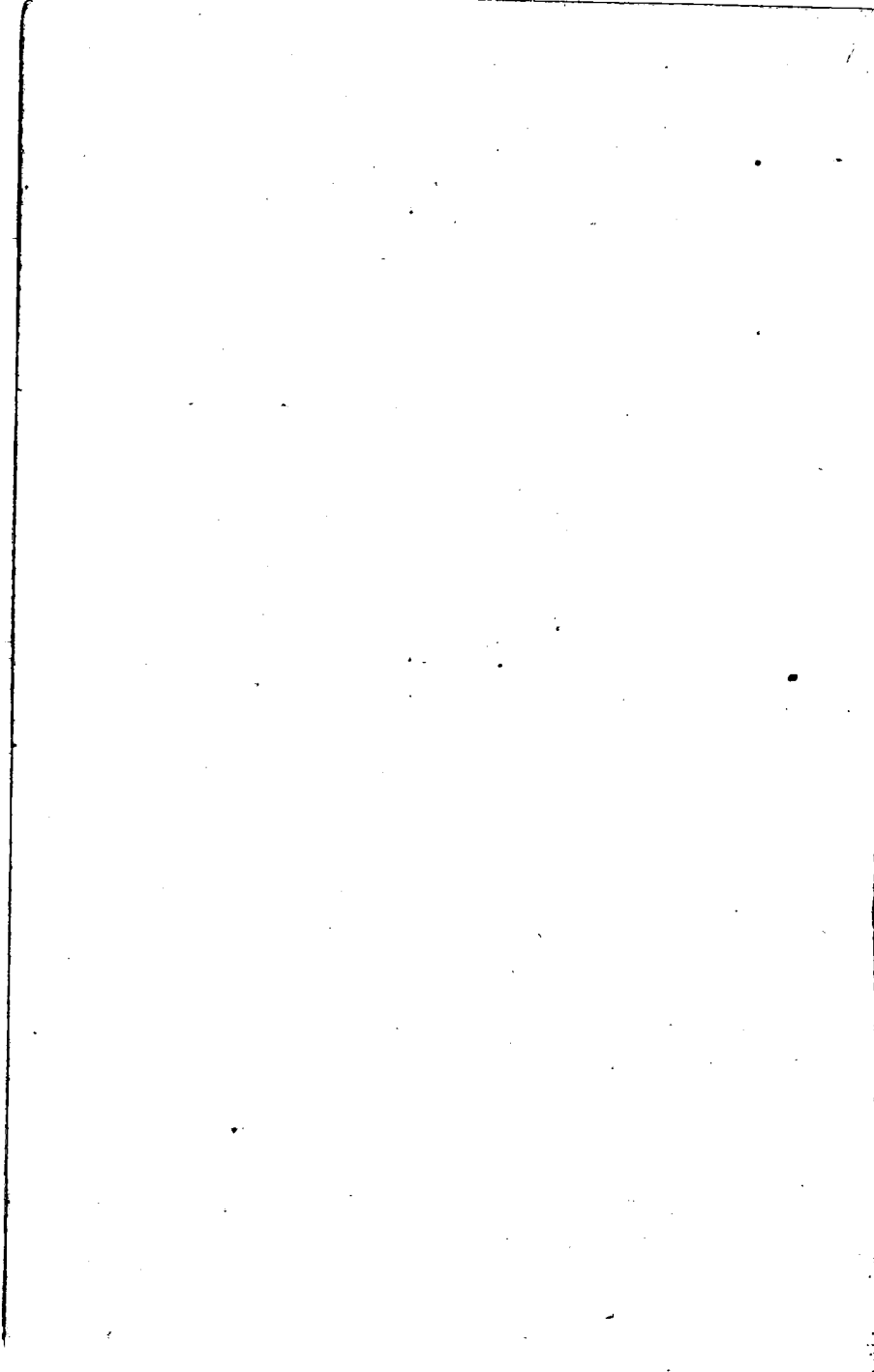
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原书缺页

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THE MOB

CHAPTER I

ABOUT three o'clock in the morning the first carts from the sierra began to arrive on the Cuatro Caminos octroi. Loaded with milk cans, they had started from Colmenar about nine o'clock, driving all night in an icy rain that seemed the last farewell of winter. The drivers wanted to reach Madrid before day-break in order to be the first to arrive at the weighing office. The vehicles lined themselves up along the road, and the animals stood patiently in the rain that dripped from their ears, their tails, and their harness. The drivers took shelter in a neighbouring tavern—the only open door in all the Cuatro Caminos district—and inhaled deeply the air which had been made stale by the respiration of the customers on the previous night. They removed their caps to shake the water off, dropped the mud from their heavy hob-nailed shoes on the floor, and, while sipping a cup of coffee with a few drops of *aguardiente*, discussed with the landlady the lunch she was to prepare for them at eleven o'clock, when they would be on their way back to their village.

At the drinking trough, next to the octroi office, several ox-carts, loaded with tree trunks, awaited the arrival of day to enter the city. The drivers slept under the carts, wrapped up in their blankets, and oxen, freed from the yoke, lay flat on the ground, their legs curled up under their bellies, chewing untiringly their dry fodder in front of the panniers.

Life began to awaken at the Cuatro Caminos. Several doors creaked, throwing a patch of reddish light on the mud of the road. From a near-by *churreria* came the pungent

stench of fried oil. In the taverns, the sleepy waiters lined up on a table near the entrance, the purveyors of their morning "poison"—square flasks of *aguardiente* with herbs and slices of lemon.

Shivering with cold, the first early-risers appeared, and, after gulping down a glass of *aguardiente* or a penny cup of coffee, continued on their way towards Madrid under the feeble light of the gas lamps. The octroi office had just opened and the drivers crowded around the scales. The tin cans shone in long rows under the shelter at the entrance. The men shouted, arguing about their turn.

"Who's ahead of me?" yelled a driver as he came up to take his turn.

And as someone announced his position, the new arrival set down his cans next and took up his place in the line, ready to defend himself with his whip from any possible intruder.

They all displayed great haste to be admitted into the city and harried the weigher and the other employees with entreaties while they, enveloped in their cloaks, wrote in the light of a kerosene lamp. The cans were filled to only half their capacity. While some drivers waited at the octroi, others proceeded towards Madrid with empty cans in search of the nearest fountain. There, within the limits of the city and without fear of being taxed, they administered the "baptism" and thus increased their merchandise considerably.

The carts from the sierra, large, with heavy wheels and black awnings, were beginning to file towards the city, pitching along the road like sombre ships in the night. Other carts, much smaller, squeezed between them and passed before the octroi without stopping. These vehicles, open boxes drawn by small donkeys, belonged to the rag-dealers. Their owners lay at the bottom of the carts, continuing their sleep, perfectly confident in the knowledge that Bravo Murillo Street was absolutely free from tramway cars at that hour. At times, a donkey, imitating its master, stopped and stood still, with drooping ears, as if sleeping, until a pull on the reins and an oath woke him up.

The rain ceased at daybreak. A violet light filtered through the clouds that floated by very low, as if they were going to touch the roofs. The buildings, damp and glistening from the recent rain, slowly emerged from the morning mist, and presently appeared the muddy ground with big pools of water, the clearings in the neighbouring woods, with the yellow earth stained by green patches of vegetation in the hollows.

Upon a height the Cemetery of San Martin displayed its romantic agglomeration of erect cypresses. The Protestant School raised its pile of red brick over the miserable houses. Along Bravo Murillo Street the interminable row of electric posts stood out—the line of white crosses flanked by two rows of small trees—and at the bottom, sunk in a valley, lay Madrid, wrapped up in the fog of the dawn, the roofs of its houses on a level with the ground, and above them the red spire of Santa Cruz with its white crown.

As the day advanced, the stream of carts and animals towards the crossing of Cuatro Caminos increased considerably. They came from Fuencarral, from Alcobendas or from Colmenar with fresh produce for the city's markets. Next to the milk cans, baskets of eggs covered with straw, cheeses, clusters of chickens and domestic rabbits were unloaded at the octroi office. In filthy promiscuity, one sort of food succeeded another upon the scales platform. Tender lambs, their throats cut and their wool stained with dried blood, were followed a few minutes after, by piles of cheeses and baskets of greens. Wrapped up in their shawls, their kerchiefs tightly tied around their temples, the country women reloaded their merchandise in the panniers, and stepping on the scales with their muddy shoes nimbly jumped on their donkeys and urged them at a trot towards Madrid, to sell their eggs and greens in the streets near by the markets.

The invasion of rag-dealers increased in volume as the day advanced. Their light carts, shaped like boxes, were painted an intense blue, with a red disc upon which was inscribed the owner's name. They came from Bellevista and from Teturan, from the districts called Almenara,

Frajana and Carolinas. The poorer ones, who did not own a cart, rode their small donkeys, their legs sticking inside the large panniers destined to receive the pickings from the rubbish heaps. The women pickers, the corners of their red neckerchiefs waving at their backs, rode erect, urging their donkeys along with sticks wielded by black hands laden with a double row of imitation rings, shining like African ornaments. Their faces were smeared with grease, their eyes were bleary from alcohol.

In a procession that displayed their different degrees of misery the donkeys, faithful companions of the rag-pickers, went by dragging the boxes or trotting under the blows of the Amazons. Small, dirty animals, their cunning was almost human. Only rarely were they allowed to pasture; they ate in their mangers the chick-peas left over from the "cocidos" in Madrid. The civilized food, which had passed through the kitchens of the city the previous day, seemed to sharpen their intelligence. Never had they felt the refreshing contact of the shears nor the beneficent caress of the curry-comb. Their hide was one enormous scab; although their backs had not the vestige of a hair, their forelegs were covered with long wool that made them look as if they were wearing trousers.

Riders and carts passed on endlessly, like a prehistoric horde fleeing with Hunger at their heels, their eager desire to live guiding them onwards. The animals trotted and tried to pass each other, as if they could smell under the mass of roofs that closed the horizon the remains of a whole day of civilized existence, the offal of the great city that fed the wretches camped in its neighbourhood.

A mob of pedestrians, the residents of the district, workmen on their way to Madrid, invaded the road, coming out from the streets next to Estrecho and Punta Brava, from all sides of Cuatro Caminos, from the miserable hovels of the district, with their gloomy corridors and their numbered doors, veritable wasp-nests of poverty.

The country carts, with their rough solidity which reminded one of the robust, healthy life of the peasants, had ceased arriving. The street was now entirely occupied

by the rag-pickers' vehicles, sordid, dirty, black, some like coffins, with awnings made of discarded wax-cloth. Along the pavements groups of workmen sauntered, some with white jackets, their lunch-bags hanging from one of the buttons, others with brown coats, their caps pulled down over their eyes. From the octroi office one could see them disappearing, hands in their pockets, their backs bent over in a humble attitude, resigned to endure the remainder of a life without hopes or surprises, knowing beforehand the monotonous grey toil that would be their lot until the day of their death.

Others, dressed in blue cloth, with black caps and wearing watches, gathered in front of the tram stopping-place waiting for the first car. They were factory mechanics, foremen and overseers, the aristocracy of manual labour, whose comparative wealth isolated them from the rest.

Free from the morning rush, the chief of the octroi office watched the workmen from the door. Suddenly spying a young man coming from Madrid, he called him, inviting him to have a cigarette. There was plenty of time to take a rest; he had the whole day to sleep if he chose. And as he offered the young man a light, he winked one eye and asked:

"How about politics, Maltrana, my friend? When are we going to get our innings? Is it true that the government is going to fall?"

Maltrana made a gesture of indifference as he lighted his cigarette. Small of stature and poorly dressed, his whole person betrayed the misery of a young life struggling without a goal, finding no road. His hat, with a filthy band, stuck on the back of his head, left exposed an enormous bulging forehead that seemed to crush with its weight his greenish-brown face. Oblique eyes and a sparse moustache of thin hairs gave his face an Asiatic mien, but the brightness of his pupils, revealing a wide-awake intelligence, softened the annoying queerness of his appearance. Under the frayed edges of his trousers, his boots showed their broken heels and cracked leather. A reddish-black Macfarland served him for a coat, and between the

lapels he displayed with a certain amount of pride his only luxury, the luxury of all poverty-stricken youths, a big tie of gaudy colours that hid his shirt, and a high and stiff collar that through use had acquired the yellow mellowness of old marble.

"How about politics?" asked the official again.

And Maltrana dropped his air of indifference. The changes in the Cabinet and what was said in parliament hardly interested him. Down in the editorial rooms, where he was wont to spend the nights, they talked hours and hours about such things, but he never made an effort to remember one single word, engulfed as he was in the reading of papers and magazines. How could such trifles interest anyone? . . . But through a desire to please his good friend, who treated him with a certain amount of respect because he wrote in the newspapers, he made an effort and answered without knowing very well what he was saying:

"Yes, I believe the government is going to fall. I heard something about it at the editorial rooms."

"And the big fellows? What do the big fellows say about it?"

Isidro Maltrana knew that the "big fellows" were the newspaper men who worked with him, the ones who concocted editorials and political articles and whom the official thus designated because he looked upon them as the depositories of national secrets, as the only prophets of the future.

"Well, the big fellows," answered the young man somewhat timidly, as if lying were repugnant to him, "think that everything is going first-rate, and that very soon we shall have our innings."

"That's what I say myself."

And after this emphatic affirmation that exuded faith, the official cast an envious glance at the young man of miserable appearance who was fortunate enough to rub elbows with the "big fellows" as their equal.

He used to see Maltrana every morning as the latter came from the editorial rooms. In order to go to bed, the poor young man had to wait until his stepfather and his

younger brother had left their wretched room in Artistas Street. Once there, he lay down on the only bed, still warm with the impression of the bodies of the bricklayer and his apprentice. Sleeping until well into the afternoon, he returned to Madrid at almost the same hour that the flock of workers wended their way back to Cuatro Caminos. His hard life was like that of a defenceless bird, with neither bill nor claws, fluttering in a forest of printed leaves, with no food other than the crumbs forgotten by someone else.

He used to take advantage of the light, paper and ink of the editorial room to translate, when the building was empty, certain books whose destination was unknown to him. He obtained this kind of work from some friends who, in their turn, had received it from the translators who signed the books. Passing through the hands of intermediaries before it reached him, the compensation for this work had shrunk so much that poor Maltrana, at the end of eight hours' laborious toiling, enviously thought of the seven *reales* his brother Pepin—better known by the nickname of Barrabas—earned as an apprentice mason. He was grateful for anything to translate, since this work was the most regular and dependable means of earning a living. The money from a translation represented his evening meal in a tavern frequented by people of the profession, small-salaried journalists, youths of flowing mane and loose ties who spoke ill of everybody, thus amusing themselves while impatiently waiting for the day when they would become famous. To be sure, these banquets did not amount to much, but how he thought about them the days when he had neither work nor the hope of getting new translations! He spent the night hours in the editorial rooms reading continuously, while hunger pinched his stomach. At times when he saw the characters dancing in front of his eyes and his head seemed to roll away, repelling all ideas, he felt a strong desire to struggle, a ferocious yearning to strike somebody. He then started some philosophical discussion, ending by making fun of the political ideals of the paper, just for the pleasure of squashing with his para-

doxes and his culture, which he wielded like a mallet, all those ignoramuses who, alas! had dined.

Sometimes, when Maltrana was suffering the pangs of hunger, certain fellow-politicians from the outskirts of Madrid came into the editorial rooms. They wanted to make a good impression on the reporters, and Maltrana looked upon them as harbingers of joy.

"Come on!" shouted the strangers, "bring coffee for the boys . . . anything they want."

And the boys devoured the generously buttered toast, drank to the dregs the black coffee and milk that filled the pots, and lighted the cheap cigars, the last, definitive trace of their friends' generosity. Maltrana, intoxicated with coffee and butter, suddenly saw everything through the bluish cloud of smoke under a most cheerful aspect, and began to speak with youthful vehemence about philosophy and literature, astonishing the strangers, who perceived in him a future great man, perhaps even a statesman, when they should get their innings! . . .

The evenings when this extraordinary succour was lacking, Maltrana, his head between his hands, pretended to be reading a foreign review, while with anxious eyes he followed every movement of Don Cristobal, the owner of the paper, a kind-hearted soul, outspoken and fatherly, whose only preoccupations were his paper, the revolution that never came, and his desire that everybody should acknowledge the sacrifices he was making for the *cause*.

"Homer . . . will you have a cigarette?"

Homer was Maltrana. His fellow-workers in the editorial rooms gave him a new nickname every month. They hated his culture, which bored them to death, for they insisted that, with all his knowledge, he was incapable of giving an account of a social function or of a sensational crime. At first, they had named him Schopenhauer, because he was constantly quoting his favourite philosopher, afterwards Nietzsche; but these names were difficult to pronounce, and one fine night when Maltrana, isolated from reality, dared to quote in Greek several verses from the *Iliad*, they decided to call him Homer for good.