

QUEEN CALAFIA

VICENTE BLASCO IBÁÑEZ

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BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE,"
"THE SHADOW OF THE CATHEDRAL," ETC.



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QUEEN CALAFIA

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE
APOCALYPSE
BLOOD AND SAND
THE ENEMIES OF WOMEN
LA BODEGA (THE FRUIT OF THE
VINE)
MARE NOSTRUM (OUR SEA)
THE MAYFLOWER
MEXICO IN REVOLUTION,
THE SHADOW OF THE CATHEDRAL
THE TORRENT
WOMAN TRIUMPHANT
THE TEMPTRESS
THE LAND OF ART

IN PREPARATION

THE ARGONAUTS
REEDS AND MUD

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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CHAPTER I

The doings of Professor Mascaro upon leaving Central University one fine morning.

FOUR times each week, after delivering his lecture on Spanish-American history and literature, Don Antonio Mascaro made it a habit to walk back to his home situated at the opposite end of Madrid.

During the first years of their married life, the Mascaros lived in the vicinity of the University. Their only daughter, however, grew up to be a young lady; and Doña Amparo, her mother, whose power in domestic administration was unlimited and whose judgments as to the family honor were undisputed, thought it proper to leave a neighborhood much frequented by students. Don Antonio himself had in the meantime made several trips abroad and developed a great liking for the modern improvements to be had in other countries. The result was profound dissatisfaction with dwellings that were fitted out in conformity with the requirements of a hundred years ago.

Remembering his impressions of "the other world"—for thus he called the American continent—Don Antonio gladly accepted his wife's choice of a home in the Salamanca district, not far from the Plaza de Toros. There was a telephone in the vestibule, an elevator—going-up privileges only—and a bathroom which, although small, contained all the approved appliances; and the bathtub did not have to be converted into a storage place for hat-boxes the way it was in many antiquated apartments. In short, Don Antonio thought a man of progressive habits and not rich ought to feel satisfied with all this and not sigh for more.

To be sure, the new home was quite a distance from the University; but this required of him only eight long walks a week, something quite necessary for a scholar spending a good deal of his time with his elbows upon a desk, his head between his palms, and his somewhat near-sighted eyes scanning at close range the pages of a book.

On his way home, Don Antonio would stop here and there at second-hand bookshops whose proprietors welcomed him cordially; and there would be a chat about recent acquisitions. They all knew where his special preference lay: works, modern and ancient, on America, although once in a while he trespassed into the realm of novels and poetry.

A few among his bookseller friends thought they knew the reason that prompted Don Antonio to buy such things: time and again they noticed, among the

obscure volumes of fiction he bought at the price of waste paper, two historical novels and a book of poems written by young Mascaro at the time he taught a general course in literature at a provincial university.

Don Antonio would progress in this manner all the way up to the Puerta del Sol. Here, his thoughts usually took an entirely different course. The man who strolled down the spacious Calle de Alcalá no longer seemed to himself a modest professor leading a monotonous life and having a few limited aspirations, who had just walked through the narrow and devious streets of old Madrid. He was now Professor Mascaro, Spanish delegate to various international congresses and noted lecturer who had visited many a university in North and South America.

He seemed to change inwardly as he made his way toward the modern part of the city where his house was situated. He felt less short-sighted as his gaze lost itself in the long avenue that reached the Puerta de Alcalá and in the reposeful groves of the Retiro. The air that now entered his lungs had decidedly a different fragrance. The sensation of his feet touching the asphalt pavement brought back to him some subtle feelings connected with the Boulevard des Italiens, Piccadilly, and Broadway. Toward the end of his long walk Mascaro felt more than ever alert and pleasantly excited. Then it was that his best ideas came to him as though the easy walking uninterrupted by stumbling, and the conspicuous absence

of bad odors unavoidable in the old city, had a beneficial effect upon his intelligence.

One spring morning, on his way home from the University, Don Antonio stopped irresolutely at the Puerta del Sol. The pale-golden atmosphere and the midday agitation of the Calle de Alcalá appealed to him. On the other hand, he thought it might be well to take a street car to the park of the Retiro and take a walk there until dinner time. At his house dinner was usually served at two o'clock in the afternoon, as is the custom in many Madrid families; thus he had enough time to enjoy some leisure in the park which he loved so well and which, together with the Museo del Prado, he considered the two best things Madrid could offer. However, a short hesitation resulted, as usual, in a third decision.

"I may just as well go to see Ricardo Balboa," he said to himself. "I haven't been up there for two days, and he might be ill, after all. You never can tell with these people who have a sick heart."

He took a street car in the direction of his own house, for Engineer Balboa lived in the same neighborhood. He remained standing upon the rear platform to enjoy the sight of automobiles and carriages passing so closely as almost to touch the edges of the car. Upon reaching the narrowest part of the avenue, he noticed many passers-by standing still and gazing with intense curiosity. Something was up.

Passengers in the street car stood up to be able to see what had happened, and the two platforms became

centers of animated comment. Everybody was looking at an open motor car occupied by two ladies and speeding toward Madrid. Mascaro gave a gesture of pity and contempt as if he regretted deeply the astonishment exhibited by the crowd.

"Nothing more nor less," he said to himself, "than a woman at the wheel of a motor car. Some foreigner, most probably. And this is what makes these people stare like sheep at a new gate. Never before have they beheld such a scandal. Poor, backward country!"

The automobile was out of sight; but Don Antonio, who was an imaginative type, still had the picture before his eyes and bubbled over with admiration for the woman driver, although the speed of the car had prevented him from getting any impression of her face.

From his early youth, he persisted in such instinctive admiration of women whom he classed as "extraordinary." He never saw them except in illustrated journals, or else portrayed in novels or on the stage. But oh, for the love of such a woman! . . .

Indeed, his life could be called a double life. One that pursued peacefully its monotonous course within the limits of reality; and the other, incessantly interrupted with vehement outbursts—but entirely imaginative. The narrow world of space and time knew him as a faithful and loving husband, somewhat tolerantly ironical toward his Doña Amparo to whom he was indebted for being the father of Consuelito.

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All the illusions and aspirations of his practical life were colored by his love of this only child. But alone with himself, in the secret recesses of his mind, he was an unrestrained and insatiable lover of love who never stopped before the most hazardous adventures, unscrupulously abandoning one for the other, or else pursuing several at a time. Such waywardness, fortunately, had no more serious consequences than a mere brain fatigue; and so his imagination, once started on its endless game of amorous fancies, worked without respite.

In his youth, the great prima donnas of the opera were objects of his dreams. To be chosen by one of those inimitable sopranos, resplendent with beauty, fame, and jewels, adored by kings and millionaires! Poor Doña Amparo was very far from ever guessing that her quiet husband, with his dreamy gaze fixed in space as though he were planning lectures and conferences, was instead following over land and sea the trail of some famous operatic star.

His taste, however, changed after he had completed several voyages through the world of realities. The sportswoman now excited his admiration with her lean, muscular figure, her resemblance to a handsome boy in a woman's apparel, her perverse suggestion of ambiguity of sex. Beauty was no longer perfect to him unless dressed in a white skirt and a gayly colored sweater, a tennis racket in hand. Another accepted variation was a woman motorist, in

man's cap and big, rough gloves, gripping her wheel with intelligent determination.

The peaceful scholar undertook more than one risky voyage around the world with one or another of these superior women. Her yacht would breast heavy storms, encounter Malay pirates, and ground upon solitary coral reefs. Other females of no less masculine charm, with rolled-up sleeves and shouldered rifles, took him along on hunting expeditions to the heart of Africa, where they shot hippopotamuses and panthers. He also had various opportunities of attacking, knife in hand, a polar bear several times his size, in order to defend his fair traveling companions somewhere in the endless polar plains.

While going through all these adventures, Mascaro carefully avoided visualizing his own image as he knew it in real life. He was afraid to deal an irreparable blow to all his romantic excursions the moment he saw his less than medium stature, his swarthy face with already deepening wrinkles, his hair, that used to be the shining black of Mediterranean type and was now gray over the temples; and his entire appearance of a good-natured gentleman that imparted something of quietness and confidence to the very atmosphere around him. He much preferred that other ego of his who skulked, a seductive demon, deep in his brain—the Mascaro who conquered women at a single glance, who made them follow him like so many submissive dogs and changed his affec-

tions without pity or consideration. The Mascaro of his dreams was a handsome youth ready to intimidate Death itself; who paid scant attention to his various lady companions while he put to flight, with a single pistol shot, both his rivals and the red-, yellow-, or black-skinned crowds of hostile natives who stood in his way.

Whenever these inventions had exhausted themselves for a while, Don Antonio used to laugh at his own imaginative escapades. It was, however, a mild and tolerant irony. There was much forgiveness in his indulgent smile for himself as well as for a large portion of mankind.

"Fortunately," he thought, "our cranium is of bone and cannot reflect the images that pass beneath its surface. What if it were like the walls of an aquarium that permit us to watch the life of those nervous and furtive beings inside? . . ."

He was convinced that human society could not endure twenty-four hours if we were able to read each other's thoughts and to watch those kaleidoscopic revels of an individual's imagination which disregard his conscience, refuse obedience, and create for him another existence. No child could respect its parents if it knew all their thoughts. Married couples, outwardly faithful, would be deeply shocked at the differences and the enmities laid between them by the vagaries of their imaginations. Grandchildren would be petrified at reading their grandfather's wild fancies behind his deeply wrinkled forehead. No

wonder persons of very austere life, upon reaching extreme old age and losing the discipline imposed by cool reason, often amaze their intimates by a licentious form of senile dementia revealing a second personality that heretofore had been carefully held in secret.

What would become of statesmen and judges, men of grave appearance and weighty speech, who feel called upon to watch over their neighbors, if their minds at any time betrayed the chaotic thoughts, the monstrous desires, that criss-cross their brains like lightning as soon as imagination is freed from restraint?

"Many of us," Don Antonio went on reasoning to himself, "persons of quiet life and sedate habits, possess a veritable harem in our secret thoughts, where we take refuge and consolation in our life of mediocrity. The most extraordinary perversities and love adventures in the world have never existed in reality: they were lived through in the imagination of quiet and lonely fathers of families."

If ever, in the midst of these revelries, Don Antonio recalled Doña Amparo, his wife, it only gave keener incentive to his dreams. At such moments he became aware of a sense of sweet revenge, as if his numerous and fanciful infidelities compensated him for her despotism at home. But the mere thought of his daughter was enough to hurl to the ground all of his perverse air castles. Shame and remorse would come, and gnaw his heart.

This time, too, the glorious train of fancy that followed in the wake of the strange motorist ended like so many others of his escapades; a young girl vaguely resembling Consuelito stepped on to the street car. Instantly, a supreme force ejected Don Antonio from the promised land. He stood before the closed doors of Paradise, helpless, remorseful.

But unable to endure mental inactivity, other things now captured his attention. Forgetting about women who drive cars and all women in general, his thoughts were directed wholly upon the friend he was going to visit—his mind concentrated with the austerity of one who still feels the whip of remorse on his back.

He did not remember with certainty the time he first met Ricardo Balboa. They were almost childhood friends, having studied and won their university degrees together.

Mascaro's family had lived in Madrid because of his father's employment; but Don Antonio was a *mediterraneo*, born in a little town in the Levant province. The first impressions childhood had afforded him were of a turquoise sea in the morning, the same sea turned to an intense azure at noontime and fading to violet in the evening; of a red-clay coast barren of vegetation except for some fragrant and stubborn desert growth, and of an undulating chain of almost incandescent hills that thirsting drank in the ardent sunlight and exhaled it back again from their bare, porous rocks.

The father of the young Balboa was Spanish, but

had made a handsome fortune in Mexico. Mascaro remembered that his friend's mother spoke Castilian with difficulty and often appealed to her husband in English to extricate her from a verbal quandary. Ricardo was born in Mexico and began his education in a primary school near the frontier of the United States. But he was a Spaniard and his father, with the high-strung patriotism of one who lives away from his country and longs to return to it, never for a moment brooked the supposition that a child of his might grow up with a nationality different from his own. And so, having accumulated his fortune, the elder Balboa had transferred the business to an associate and had come to live in Madrid. In this way, his son was not going to be either a *gringo* like his mother, or a Mexican because of having been born there. He was to receive the education of a Spaniard.

In his early youth Mascaro, who came from a poor family, was introduced to these affluent Americans who spent their money without measure or regret.

Young Balboa studied mining engineering. His father wanted to develop his mines and thought in this way to evade the necessity of hiring foreign experts—a veritable plague for him for he was a man of genius but without the specialized knowledge which his affairs required. Mascaro, on the other hand, chose courses in literature, partly from natural inclination, partly with the hope of so making for himself a living and a career as a scholar.