

MARE NOSTRUM (OUR SEA)

A Novel

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"Enemies of Women," etc.

Authorized Translation from the Spanish by
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I CAPTAIN ULYSSES FERRAGUT	1
II MATER AMPHITRITE	23
III PATER OCEANUS	58
IV FREYA	88
V THE AQUARIUM OF NAPLES	154
VI THE WILES OF CIRCE	191
VII THE SIN OF ULYSSES	244
VIII THE YOUNG TELEMACHUS	304
IX THE ENCOUNTER AT MARSEILLES	328
X IN BARCELONA	377
XI "FAREWELL, I AM GOING TO DIE"	427
XII AMPHITRITE! . . . AMPHITRITE!	478

MARE NOSTRUM

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN ULYSSES FERRAGUT

His first gallantries were with an empress. He was ten years old, and the empress six hundred.

His father, Don Esteban Ferragut—third quota of the College of Notaries—had always had a great admiration for the things of the past. He lived near the cathedral, and on Sundays and holy days, instead of following the faithful to witness the pompous ceremonials presided over by the cardinal-archbishop, used to betake himself with his wife and son to hear mass in *San Juan del Hospital*,—a little church sparsely attended the rest of the week.

The notary, who had read Walter Scott in his youth, used to gaze on the old and turreted walls surrounding the church, and feel something of the bard's thrills about his own, his native land. The Middle Ages was the period in which he would have liked to have lived. And as he trod the flagging of the *Hospitalarios*, good Don Esteban, little, chubby, and near-sighted, used to feel within him the soul of a hero born too late. The other churches, huge and rich, appeared to him with their blaze of gleaming gold, their alabaster convolutions and their jasper columns, mere monuments of insipid vulgarity. This one had been erected by the Knights of

Saint John, who, united with the Templars, had aided King James in the conquest of Valencia.

Upon crossing the covered passageway leading from the street to the inner court, he was accustomed to salute the Virgin of the Conquest, an image of rough stone in faded colors and dull gold, seated on a bench, brought thither by the knights of the military order. Some sour orange trees spread their branching verdure over the walls of the church,—a blackened, rough stone edifice perforated with long, narrow, window-like niches now closed with mud plaster. From the salient buttresses of its reinforcements jutted forth, in the highest parts, great fabled monsters of weather-beaten, crumbling stone.

In its only nave was now left very little of this romantic exterior. The baroque taste of the seventeenth century had hidden the Gothic arch under another semi-circular one, besides covering the walls with a coat of whitewash. But the medieval reredos, the nobiliary coats of arms, and the tombs of the Knights of Saint John with their Gothic inscriptions still survived the profane restoration, and that in itself was enough to keep up the notary's enthusiasm.

Moreover the quality of the faithful who attended its services had to be taken into consideration. They were few but select, always the same. Some of them would drop into their places, gouty and relaxed, supported by an old servant wearing a shabby lace mantilla as though she were the housekeeper. Others would remain standing during the service holding up proudly their emaciated heads that presented the profile of a fighting cock, and crossing upon the breast their gloved hands,—always in black wool in the winter and in thread in the summer time. Ferragut knew all their names, having read them in the *Trovas* of Mosen Febrer, a

metrical composition in Provençal, about the warriors that came to the neighborhood of Valencia from Aragon, Catalonia, the South of France, England and remote Germany.

At the conclusion of the mass, the imposing personages would nod their heads, saluting the faithful nearest them. "Good day!" To these, it was as if the sun had just arisen: the hours before did not count. And the notary with meek voice would enlarge his response: "Good day, Señor Marquis!" "Good day, Señor Baron!" Although his relations never went beyond this salutation, Ferragut used to feel toward these noble personages the sympathy that the customers have for an establishment, looking upon them with affectionate eyes for many years without presuming to exchange more than a greeting with them.

His son Ulysses was exceedingly bored as he followed the monotonous incidents of the chanted mass in the darkened, almost deserted, church. The rays of the sun, oblique beams of gold that filtered in from above, illuminating the spirals of dust, flies and moths, made him think in a homesick way of the lush green of the orchard, the white spots of the hamlets, the black smoke columns of the harbor filled with steamships, and the triple file of bluish convexities crowned with froth that were discharging their contents with a sonorous surge upon the bronze-colored beach.

When the embroidered mantles of the three priests ceased to gleam before the high altar, and another priest in black and white appeared in the pulpit, Ulysses would turn his glance toward a side chapel. The sermon always represented for him a half hour of somnolence, peopled with his own lively imaginings. The first thing that his eyes used to see in the chapel of Santa Barbara was a chest nailed to the wall high above him, a sepulcher

of painted wood with no other adornment than the inscription: "*Aqui yace Doña Constanza Augusta, Emperatriz de Grecia,*"—Here lies Constance Augusta, Empress of Greece.

The name of Greece always had the power of exciting the little fellow's imagination. His godfather, the lawyer Labarta, poet-laureate, could not repeat this name without a lively thrill passing across his grizzled beard and a new light in his eyes. Sometimes the mysterious power of such a name evoked a new mystery and a more intense interest,—Byzantium. How could that august lady, sovereign of remote countries of magnificence and vision, have come to leave her remains in a murky chapel of Valencia within a great chest like those that treasured the remnants of old trumpery in the garrets of the notary? . . .

One day after mass Don Esteban had rapidly recounted her history to his little son. She was the daughter of Frederick the Second of Suabia, a Hohenstaufen, an emperor of Germany who esteemed still more his crown of Sicily. In the palaces of Palermo,—veritable enchanted bowers of Oriental gardens,—he had led the life both of pagan and savant, surrounded by poets and men of science (Jews, Mahometans and Christians), by Oriental dancers, alchemists, and ferocious Saracen Guards. He legislated as did the jurisconsults of ancient Rome, at the same time writing the first verses in Italian. His life was one continual combat with the Popes who hurled upon him excommunication upon excommunication. For the sake of peace he had become a crusader and set forth upon the conquest of Jerusalem. But Saladin, another philosopher of the same class, had soon come to an agreement with his Christian colleague. The position of a little city surrounded with untilled land and an empty sepulcher was really not worth the trouble of decapitating

mankind through the centuries. The Saracen monarch, therefore, graciously delivered Jerusalem over to him, and the Pope again excommunicated Frederick for having conquered the Holy Land without bloodshed.

"He was a great man," Don Esteban used to murmur. "It must be admitted that he was a great man. . . ."

He would say this timidly, regretting that his enthusiasm for that remote epoch should oblige him to make this concession to an enemy of the Church. He shuddered to think of those sacrilegious books that nobody had seen, but whose paternity Rome was accustomed to attribute to this Sicilian Emperor—especially *Los Tres Impostores* (The Three Imposters), in which Frederick measured Moses, Jesus and Mahomet, by the same standard. This royal author was, moreover, the most ancient journalist of history, the first that in the full thirteenth century had dared to appeal to the judgment of public opinion in his manifestoes against Rome.

His daughter had married an Emperor of Byzantium, Juan Dukas Vatatzés, the famous "Vatacio," when he was fifty and she fourteen. She was a natural daughter soon legitimized like almost all his progeny,—a product of his free harem, in which were mingled Saracen beauties and Italian marchionesses. And the poor young girl married to "Vatacio the heretic," by a father in need of political alliances had lived long years in the Orient as a *basilisa* or empress, arrayed in garments of stiff embroidery representing scenes from the holy books, shod with buskins laced with purple which bore on their soles eagles of gold,—the highest symbol of the majesty of Rome.

At first she had reigned in Nicæa, refuge of the Greek Emperors while Constantinople was in the power of the Crusaders, founders of a Latin dynasty; then, when Vatacio died, the audacious Miguel Paleólogo reconquered Constantinople, and the imperial widow found

herself courted by this victorious adventurer. For many years she resisted his pretensions, finally manœuvring that her brother Manfred should return her to her own country, where she arrived just in time to receive news of her brother's death in battle, and to follow the flight of her sister-in-law and nephews. They all took refuge in a castle defended by Saracens in the service of Frederick, the only ones faithful to his memory.

The castle fell into the power of the warriors of the Church, and Manfred's wife was conducted to a prison where her life was shortly after extinguished. Obscurity swallowed up the last remnants of the family accursed by Rome. Death was always hovering around the *basilisa*. They all perished—her brother Manfred, her half-brother, the poetic and lamented Encio, hero of so many songs, and her nephew, the knightly Coradino, who was to die later on under the axe of the executioner upon attempting the defense of his rights. As the Oriental empress did not represent any danger for the dynasty of Anjou, the conqueror let her follow out her destiny, as lonely and forsaken as a Shakesperian Princess.

As the widow of the late Emperor she was supposed to have a rental of three thousand *besantes* of fine gold. But this remote rental never arrived, and almost as a pauper she embarked with her niece, Constanza, in a ship going toward the perfumed shores of the Gulf of Valencia, where she entered the convent of Santa Barbara. In the poverty of this recently founded convent, the poor Empress lived until the following century, recalling the adventures of her melancholy destiny and seeing in imagination the palace of golden mosaics on Lake Nicæa, the gardens where "Vatacio" had wished to die under a purple tent, the gigantic walls of Constantinople, and the arches of Saint Sophia, with its hieratic galaxies of saints and crowned monarchs.

From all her journeys and glittering fortunes she had preserved but one thing—a stone—the sole baggage that accompanied her upon disembarking on the shore of Valencia. It was a fragment from Nicodemia that had miraculously sent forth water for the baptism of Santa Barbara.

The notary used to point out this rough, sacred stone inlaid in a baptismal font of Holy Water. Without ceasing to admire these historic bits of knowledge, Ulysses, nevertheless, used to receive them with a certain ingratitude.

“My godfather could explain things to me in a better way. . . . My godfather knows more.”

When surveying the chapel of Santa Barbara during the Mass, he used always to turn his eyes away from the funeral chest. The thought of those bones turned to dust filled him with repugnance. That Doña Constanza did not exist for him. The one who was interesting to him was the other one, a little further on who was painted in a small picture. Doña Constanza had had leprosy—an infirmity that in those days was not permitted to Empresses—so Santa Barbara had miraculously cured her devotee. In order to perpetuate this event, Santa Barbara was depicted on the canvas as a lady dressed in a full skirt and slashed sleeves, and at her feet was the *basilisa* in the dress of a Valencian peasant arrayed in great jewels. In vain Don Esteban affirmed that this picture had been painted centuries after the death of the Empress. The child’s imagination vaulted disdainfully over such difficulties. Just as she appeared on the canvas, Doña Constanza must have been—flaxen-haired, with great black eyes, exceedingly handsome and a little inclined to stoutness, perhaps, as was becoming to a woman accustomed to trailing robes of state and

who had consented to disguise herself as a country-woman, merely because of her piety.

The image of the Empress obsessed his childish thoughts. At night when he felt afraid in bed, impressed by the enormousness of the room that served as his sleeping chamber, it was enough for him to recall the sovereign of Byzantium to make him forget immediately his disquietude and the thousand queer noises in the old building. "Doña Constanza!" . . . And he would go off to sleep cuddling the pillow, as though it were the head of the *basilisa*, his closed eyes continuing to see the black eyes of the regal Señora, maternal and affectionate.

All womankind, on coming near him, took on something of that other one who had been sleeping for the past six centuries in the upper part of the chapel wall. When his mother, sweet and pallid Doña Cristina, would stop her fancy work for an instant to give him a kiss, he always saw in her smile something of the Empress. When Visenteta, a maid from the country—a brunette, with eyes like blackberries, rosy-cheeked and soft-skinned—would help him to undress, or awaken him to take him to school, Ulysses would always throw his arms around her as though enchanted by the perfume of her vigorous and chaste vitality. "Visenteta! . . . Oh, Visenteta! . . ." And he was thinking of Doña Constanza; Empresses must be just that fragrant. . . . Just like that must be the texture of their skin! . . . And mysterious and incomprehensible thrills would pass over his body like light exhalations, bubbling up from the slime that is sleeping in the depths of all infancy and coming to the surface during adolescence.

His father guessed in part this imaginary life upon seeing his pet plays and readings.

"Ah, comedian! . . . Ah, play-actor! . . . you are like your godfather."

He used to say this with an ambiguous smile in which were equally mingled his contempt for useless idealism and his respect for the artist—a respect similar to the veneration that the Arabs feel for the demented, believing their insanity to be a gift from God.

Doña Cristina was very anxious that this only son, as spoiled and coddled as though he were a Crown Prince, should become a priest. To see him intone his first Mass! . . . Then a canon; then a prelate! Who knew if perhaps when she was no longer living, other women might not admire him when preceded by a cross of gold, trailing the red state robe of a cardinal-archbishop, and surrounded by a robed staff—envying the mother who had given birth to this ecclesiastical magnate! . . .

In order to guide the inclinations of her son she had installed a chapel in one of the empty rooms of the great old house. Ulysses' school companions on free afternoons would hasten thither, doubly attracted by the enchantment of "playing priest" and by the generous refreshment that Doña Cristina used to prepare for all the parish clergy.

This solemnity would begin with the furious pealing of some bells hanging over the parlor door, causing the notary's clients, seated in the vestibule waiting for the papers that the clerks were just scribbling off at full speed, to raise their heads in astonishment. The metallic uproar rocked the edifice whose corners had seemed so full of silence, and even disturbed the calm of the street through which a carriage only occasionally passed.

While some of his chums were lighting the candles on the shrines and unfolding the sacred altar cloths of beautiful lace work made by Doña Cristina, the son and his more intimate friends were arraying themselves before

the faithful, covering themselves with surplices and gold-worked vestments and putting wonderful caps on their heads. The mother, who was peeping from behind one of the doors, had to make a great effort not to rush in and devour Ulysses with kisses. With what grace he was imitating the mannerisms and genuflections of the chief priest! . . .

Up to this point all went perfectly. The three officiating near the pyramid of lights were singing at the top of their lungs, and the chorus of the faithful were responding from the end of the room with tremors of impatience. Suddenly surged forth Protest, Schism and Heresy. Those at the altar had already done more than enough. They must now give up their chasubles to those who were looking on in order that they, in their turn, might exercise the sacred ministry. That was what they had agreed upon. But the clergy resisted with the haughtiness and majesty of acquired right, and impious hands began pulling off the garb of the saints, profaning them and even tearing them. Yells, kicks, images and wax candles on the floor! . . . Scandal and abominations as though the Anti-Christ were already born! . . . The prudence of Ulysses put an end to the struggle: "What if we should go up in the *pòrche* to play? . . ."

The *pòrche* was the immense garret of the great old house, so all accepted the plan with enthusiasm. Church was over! And like a flock of birds they went flying up the stairs over the landings of multi-colored tiles with their chipped glaze, disclosing the red brick underneath. The Valencian potters of the eighteenth century had adorned these tiles with Berber and Christian galleys, birds from nearby Albufera, white-wigged hunters offering flowers to a peasant girl, fruits of all kinds, and spirited horsemen on steeds that were half the size of their

bodies parading before houses and trees that scarcely reached to the knees of their prancing coursers.

The noisy group spread themselves over the upper floor as in the most terrible invasions of history. Cats and mice fled together to the far-away corners. The terrified birds sped like arrows through the skylights of the roof.

The poor notary! . . . He had never returned empty-handed when called outside of the city by the confidence of the rich farmers, incapable of believing in any other legal science than his. That was the time when the antique dealers had not yet discovered rich Valencia, where the common people dressed in silks for centuries, and furniture, clothing and pottery seemed always to be impregnated with the light of steady sunshine and with the blue of an always clear atmosphere.

Don Esteban, who believed himself obliged to be an antiquarian by virtue of his membership in various local societies, was continually filling up his house with mementoes of the past picked up in the villages, or that his clients freely gave him. He was not able to find wall space enough for the pictures, nor room in his salons for the furniture. Therefore, the latest acquisitions were provisionally taking their way to the *pòrche* to await definite installation. Years afterward, when he should retire from his profession, he might be able to construct a medieval castle—the most medieval possible on the coasts of the *Marina*; near to the village where he had been born, he would put each object in a place appropriate to its importance.

Whatever the notary deposited in the rooms of the first floor would soon make its appearance in the garret as mysteriously as though it had acquired feet; for Doña Cristina and her servants, obliged to live in a continual struggle with the dust and cobwebs of an edifice that was

slowly dropping to pieces, were beginning to feel a ferocious hatred of everything old.

Up here on the top floor, discords and battles because of lack of things to dress up in, were not possible among the boys. They had only to sink their hands into any one of the great old chests, pulsing with the dull gnawing of the wood-borers, whose iron fretwork, pierced like lace, was dropping away from its supports. Some of the youngsters, brandishing short, small swords with hilts of mother-of-pearl, or long blades such as the Cid carried, would then wrap themselves in mantles of crimson silk darkened by ages. Others would throw over their shoulders damask counterpanes of priceless old brocade, peasant skirts with great flowers of gold, farthingales of richly woven texture that crackled like paper.

When they grew tired of imitating comedians with noisy clashing of spades and death-blows, Ulysses and the other active lads would propose the game of "Bandits and Bailiffs." But thieves could not go clad in such rich cloths; their attire ought to be inconspicuous. And so they overturned some mountains of dull-colored stuffs that appeared like mere sacking in whose dull woven designs could be dimly discerned legs, arms, heads, and branching sprays of metallic green.

Don Esteban had found these fragments already torn by the farmers into covers for their large earthen jars of oil or into blankets for the work-mules. They were bits of tapestry copied from cartoons of Titian and Rubens which the notary was keeping only out of historic respect. Tapestry then, like all things that are plentiful, had no special merit. The old-clothes dealers of Valencia had in their storehouses dozens of the same kind of remnants and when the festival of *Corpus Christi* approached they used them to cover the natural barricades.

formed by the ground, instead of building new ones in the street followed by the processions.

At other times, Ulysses repeated the same game under the name of "Indians and Conquerors." He had found in the mountains of books stored away by his father, a volume that related in double columns, with abundant wood cuts, the navigations of Columbus, the wars of Hernando Cortez, and the exploits of Pizarro.

This book cast a glamor over the rest of his existence. Many times afterwards, when a man, he found this image latent in the background of his likes and desires. He really had read few of its paragraphs, but what interested him most were the engravings—in his estimation more worthy of admiration than all the pictures in the garret.

With the point of his long sword he would trace on the ground, just as Pizarro had done before his discouraged companions, ready on the Island of Gallo to desist from the conquest: "Let every good Castilian pass this line. . . ." And the good Castilians—a dozen little scamps with long capes and ancient swords whose hilts reached up to their mouths—would hasten to group themselves around their chief, who was imitating the heroic gestures of the conqueror. Then was heard the war-cry: "At them! Down with the Indians!"

It was agreed that the Indians should flee and on that account they were modestly clad in scraps of tapestry and cock feathers on their head. But they fled treacherously, and upon finding themselves upon *vargueños*, tables and pyramids of chairs, they began to shy books at their persecutors. Venerable leather volumes decorated with dull gold, and folios of white parchment fell face downward on the floor, their fastenings breaking apart and spreading abroad a rain of printed or manuscript pages and yellowing engravings—as though tired of living, they were letting their life-blood flow from their bodies.

The uproar of these wars of conquest brought Doña Cristina to the rescue. She no longer cared to harbor little imps who preferred the adventurous whoops of the garret to the mystic delights of the abandoned chapel. The Indians were most worthy of execration. In order to make splendor of attire counterbalance the humility of their rôle, they had slashed their sinful scissors into entire tapestries, mutilating vestments so as to arrange upon their breasts the head of a hero or goddess.

Finding himself without playfellows, Ulysses discovered a new enchantment in the garret life. The silence haunted by the creaking of wood and the scampering of invisible animals, the inexplicable fall of a picture or of some piled-up books, used to make him thrill with a sensation of fear and nocturnal mystery, despite the rays of sunlight that came filtering in through the skylights; but he began to enjoy this solitude when he found that he could people it to his fancy. Real beings soon annoyed him like the inopportune sounds that sometimes awoke him from beautiful dreams. The garret was a world several centuries old that now belonged entirely to him and adjusted itself to all his fancies.

Seated in a trunk without a lid, he made it balance itself, imitating with his mouth the roarings of the tempest. It was a caravel, a galleon, a ship such as he had seen in the old books, its sails painted with lions and crucifixes, a castle on the poop and a figure-head carved on the prow that dipped down into the waves, only to reappear dripping with foam.

The trunk, by dint of vigorous pushing, could be made to reach the rugged coast at the corner of the old chest, the triangular gulf made of two chests of drawers, and the smooth beach formed by some bundles of clothes. And the navigator, followed by a crew as numerous as it was imaginary, would leap ashore, sword in hand, scaling

some mountains of books that were the Andes, and piercing various volumes with the tip of an old lance in order to plant his standard there. Oh, why had he not been one of the conquerors? . . .

Fragments of a conversation between his godfather and his father, who believed everything was already known regarding the surface of the earth, left him unconvinced. Something must still be left for him to discover! He was the meeting point of two families of sailors. His mother's brothers had ships on the coast of Catalonia. His father's ancestors had been valorous and obscure navigators, and there in the *Marina* was his uncle, the doctor, a genuine man of the sea.

When he grew tired of these imaginative orgies, he used to examine the portraits of different epochs stowed away in the garret. He preferred those of the women—noble dames with short-cropped, curled hair bound by a knot of ribbon on the temple, like those that Velazquez loved to paint, and long faces of the century following, with cherry-colored mouth, two patches on the cheeks, and a tower of white hair. The memory of the Grecian *basilisa* appeared to emanate from these paintings. All the high-born dames seemed to have something in common with her.

Among the portraits of the men there was one of a bishop that irritated him by its absurd childishness. He appeared almost his own age, an adolescent bishop, with imperious and aggressive eyes. These eyes used to inspire the sensitive lad with a certain terror, and he therefore decided to have done with them. "Take that!" and he ran his sword through the old chipped picture, making two gashes replace the challenging eyes. Then he added a few gashes more for good measure. . . . That same evening, his godfather having been invited to supper, the notary spoke of a certain portrait acquired a