

LUNA BENAMOR

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TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL SPANISH

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I

LUIS AGUIRRE had been living in Gibraltar for about a month. He had arrived with the intention of sailing at once upon a vessel bound for Oceanica, where he was to assume his post as a consul to Australia. It was the first important voyage of his diplomatic career. Up to that time he had served in Madrid, in the offices of the Ministry, or in various consulates of southern France, elegant summery places where for half the year life was a continuous holiday. The son of a family that had been dedicated to diplomacy by tradition, he enjoyed the protection of influential persons. His parents were dead, but he was helped by his relatives and the prestige of a name that for a century had figured in the archives of the nation. Consul at the age of twenty-five, he was about to set sail with the illusions of a student who goes out into the world for the first time, feeling that all previous trips have been insignificant.

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Gibraltar, incongruous and exotic, a mixture of races and languages, was to him the first sign of the far-off world in quest of which he was journeying. He doubted, in his first surprise, if this rocky land jutting into the open sea and under a foreign flag, could be a part of his native peninsula. When he gazed out from the sides of the cliff across the vast blue bay with its rose-colored mountains dotted by the bright settlements of La Línea, San Roque and Algeciras,—the cheery whiteness of Andalusian towns,—he felt convinced that he was still in Spain. But great difference distinguished the human groups camped upon the edge of this horseshoe of earth that embraced the bay. From the headland of Tarifa to the gates of Gibraltar, a monotonous unity of race; the happy warbling of the Andalusian dialect; the broadbrimmed hat; the *mantilla* about the women's bosoms and the glistening hair adorned with flowers. On the huge mountain topped by the British flag and enclosing the oriental part of the bay, a seething cauldron of races, a confusion of tongues,

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a carnival of costume: Hindus, Mussulmen, English, Hebrews, Spanish smugglers, soldiers in red coats, sailors from every nation, living within the narrow limits of the fortifications, subjected to military discipline, beholding the gates of the cosmopolitan sheepfold open with the signal at sunrise and close at the booming of the sunset gun. And as the frame of this picture, vibrant with its mingling of color and movement, a range of peaks, the highlands of Africa, the Moroccan mountains, stretched across the distant horizon, on the opposite shore of the strait; here is the most crowded of the great marine boulevards, over whose blue highway travel incessantly the heavily laden ships of all nationalities and of all flags; black transatlantic steamers that plow the main in search of the seaports of the poetical Orient, or cut through the Suez Canal and are lost in the isle-dotted immensities of the Pacific.

To Aguirre, Gibraltar was a fragment of the distant Orient coming forward to meet him; an Asiatic port wrenched from its

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continent and dragged through the waves to run aground on the coast of Europe, as a sample of life in remote countries.

He was stopping at a hotel on Royal Street, a thoroughfare that winds about the mountain,—that vertebral column of the city to which lead, like thin threads, the smaller streets in ascending or descending slope. Every morning he was startled from his sleep by the noise of the sunrise gun,—a dry, harsh discharge from a modern piece, without the reverberating echo of the old cannon. The walls trembled, the floors shook, window panes and curtains palpitated, and a few moments later a noise was heard in the street, growing gradually louder; it was the sound of a hurrying flock, the dragging of thousands of feet, the buzz of conversations carried on in a low voice along the closed and silent buildings. It was the Spanish day laborers arriving from La Línea ready for work at the arsenal; the farmhands from San Roque and Algeciras who supplied the people of Gibraltar with vegetables and fruits.

It was still dark. On the coast of Spain

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perhaps the sky was blue and the horizon was beginning to be colored by the rain of gold from the glorious birth of the sun. In Gibraltar the sea fogs condensed around the heights of the cliff, forming a sort of blackish umbrella that covered the city, holding it in a damp penumbra, wetting the streets and the roofs with impalpable rain. The inhabitants despaired beneath this persistent mist, wrapped about the mountain tops like a mourning hat. It seemed like the spirit of Old England that had flown across the seas to watch over its conquest; a strip of London fog that had insolently taken up its place before the warm coasts of Africa, the very home of the sun.

The morning advanced, and the glorious, unobstructed light of the bay, yellow blue, at last succeeded in penetrating the settlement of Gibraltar, descending into the very depths of its narrow streets, dissolving the fog that had settled upon the trees of the Alameda and the foliage of the pines that extended along the coast so as to mask the fortifications at the top, drawing forth from the shadows the gray masses of the cruisers

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anchored in the harbor and the black bulk of the cannon that formed the shore batteries, filtering into the lugubrious embrasures pierced through the cliff, cavernous mouths revealing the mysterious defences that had been wrought with mole-like industry in the heart of the rock.

When Aguirre went down to the entrance of the hotel, after having given up all attempt to sleep during the commotion in the street, the thoroughfare was already in the throes of its regular commercial hurly-burly, a multitude of people, the inhabitants of the entire town plus the crews and the passengers of the vessels anchored in the harbor. Aguirre plunged into the bustle of this cosmopolitan population, walking from the section of the waterfront to the palace of the governor. He had become an Englishman, as he smilingly asserted. With the innate ability of the Spaniard to adapt himself to the customs of all foreign countries he imitated the manner of the English inhabitants of Gibraltar. He had bought himself a pipe, wore a traveling cap, turned up trousers and a swagger stick. The day

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on which he arrived, even before nightfall, they already knew throughout Gibraltar who he was and whither he was bound. Two days later the shopkeepers greeted him from the doors of their shops, and the idlers, gathered on the narrow square before the Commercial Exchange, glanced at him with those affable looks that greet a stranger in a small city where nobody keeps his secret.

He walked along in the middle of the street, avoiding the light, canvas-topped carriages. The tobacco stores flaunted many-colored signs with designs that served as the trade-mark of their products. In the show windows the packages of tobacco were heaped up like so many bricks, and monstrous unsmokable cigars, wrapped in tinfoil as if they were sausages, glitteringly displayed their absurd size; through the doors of the Hebrew shops, free of any decoration, could be seen the shelves laden with rolls of silk and velvet, or the rich silk laces hanging from the ceiling. The Hindu bazaars overflowed into the street with their exotic, polychrome rarities: clothes em-

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broidered with terror-inspiring divinities and chimerical animals; carpets in which the lotus-flower was adapted to the strangest designs; kimonos of delicate, indefinable tints; porcelain jars with monsters that belched fire; amber-colored shawls, as delicate as woven sighs; and in the small windows that had been converted into display cases, all the trinkets of the extreme Orient, in silver, ivory or ebony; black elephants with white tusks, heavy-paunched Buddhas, filigree jewels, mysterious amulets, daggers engraved from hilt to point. Alternating with these establishments of a free port that lives upon contraband, there were confectioneries owned by Jews, cafes and more cafes, some of the Spanish type with round, marble-topped tables, the clicking of dominoes, smoke-laden atmosphere and high-pitched discussions accompanied by vehement gestures; others resembling more the English bar, crowded with motionless, silent customers, swallowing one cocktail after another, without any other sign of emotion than a growing redness of the nose.

Through the center of the street there

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passed by, like a masquerade, the variety of types and costumes that had surprised Aguirre as a spectacle distinct from that furnished by other European cities. There were Moroccans, some with a broad, hooded cape, white or black, the cowl lowered as if they were friars; others wearing balloon trousers, their calves exposed to the air and with no other protection for the feet than their loose, yellow slippers; their heads covered by the folds of their turbans. They were Moors from Tangier who supplied the place with poultry and vegetables, keeping their money in the embroidered leather wallets that hung from their girdled waists. The Jews of Morocco, dressed in oriental fashion with silk kirtle and an ecclesiastical calotte, passed by leaning upon sticks, as if thus dragging along their bland, timid obesity. The soldiers of the garrison,—tall, slender, rosy-complexioned—made the ground echo with the heavy cadence of their boots. Some were dressed in khaki, with the sobriety of the soldier in the field; others wore the regular red jacket. White helmets, some lined with yellow, alternated

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with the regulation caps; on the breasts of the sergeants shone the red stripe; other soldiers carried in their armpits the thin cane that is the emblem of authority. Above the collar of many coats rose the extraordinarily thin British neck, high, giraffe-like, with a pointed protuberance in front. Soon the further end of the street was filled with white; an avalanche of snowy patches seemed to advance with rhythmic step. It was the caps of the sailors. The cruisers in the Mediterranean had given their men shore leave and the thoroughfare was filled with ruddy, clean-shaven boys, with faces bronzed by the sun, their chests almost bare within the blue collar, their trousers wide at the bottom, swaying from side to side like an elephant's trunk, fellows with small heads and childish features, with their huge hands hanging at the ends of their arms as if the latter could hardly sustain their heavy bulk. The groups from the fleet separated, disappearing into the various side streets in search of a tavern. The policeman in the white helmet followed with a resigned look,

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certain that he would have to meet some of them later in a tussle, and beg the favor of the king when, at the sound of the sunset gun, he would bring them back dead drunk to their cruiser.

Mingling with these fighters were gypsies with their loose belts, their long staffs and their dark faces; old and repulsive creatures, who no sooner stopped before a shop than the owners became uneasy at the mysterious hiding-places of their cloaks and skirts; Jews from the city, too, with broad frocks and shining silk hats, dressed for the celebration of one of their holidays; negroes from the English possessions; coppery Hindus with drooping mustache and white trousers, so full and short that they looked like aprons; Jewesses from Gibraltar, dressed in white with all the correctness of the Englishwomen; old Jewesses from Morocco, obese, puffed out, with a many-colored kerchief knotted about their temples; black cassocks of Catholic priests, tight frocks of Protestant priests, loose gowns of venerable rabbis, bent, with flowing beards, exuding grime and sacred wis-

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dom. . . And all this multifarious world was enclosed in the limits of a fortified town, speaking many tongues at the same time, passing without any transition in the course of the conversation from English to a Spanish pronounced with the strong Andalusian accent.

Aguirre wondered at the moving spectacle of Royal Street; at the continuously renewed variety of its multitude. On the great boulevards of Paris, after sitting in the same café for six days in succession, he knew the majority of those who passed by on the sidewalk. They were always the same. In Gibraltar, without leaving the restricted area of its central street, he experienced surprises every day. The whole country seemed to file by between its two rows of houses. Soon the street was filled with bearskin caps worn by ruddy, green-eyed, flat-nosed persons. It was a Russian invasion. There had just anchored in the harbor a transatlantic liner that was bearing this cargo of human flesh to America. They scattered throughout the place; they crowded the cafés and the shops, and under

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their invading wave they blotted out the normal population of Gibraltar. At two o'clock it had resumed its regular aspect and there reappeared the helmets of the police, the sailors' caps, the turbans of the Moors, the Jews and the Christians. The liner was already at sea after having taken on its supply of coal; and thus, in the course of a single day, there succeeded one another the rapid and uproarious invasions of all the races of the continent, in this city that might be called the gateway of Europe, by the inevitable passage through which one part of the world communicates with the Orient and the other with the Occident.

As the sun disappeared, the flash of a discharge gleamed from the top of the mountain, and the boom of the sunset gun warned strangers without a residence permit that it was time to leave the city. The evening patrol paraded through the streets, with its military music of fifes and drums grouped about the beloved national instrument of the English, the bass drum, which was being pounded with both hands by a perspiring athlete, whose rolled-up sleeves

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revealed powerful biceps. Behind marched Saint Peter, an official with escort, carrying the keys to the city. Gibraltar was now out of communication with the rest of the world; doors and gates were closed. Thrust upon itself it turned to its devotions, finding in religion an excellent pastime to precede supper and sleep. The Jews lighted the lamps of their synagogues and sang to the glory of Jehovah; the Catholics counted their rosaries in the Cathedral; from the Protestant temple, built in the Moorish style as if it were a mosque, rose, like a celestial whispering, the voices of the virgins accompanied by the organ; the Mussulmen gathered in the house of their consul to whine their interminable and monotonous salutation to Allah. In the temperance restaurants, established by Protestant piety for the cure of drunkenness, sober soldiers and sailors, drinking lemonade or tea, broke forth into harmonious hymns to the glory of the Lord of Israel, who in ancient times had guided the Jews through the desert and was now guiding old England over the seas, that she might

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establish her morality and her merchandise.

Religion filled the existence of these people, to the point of suppressing nationality. Aguirre knew that in Gibraltar he was not a Spaniard; he was a Catholic. And the others, for the most part English subjects, scarcely recalled this status, designating themselves by the name of their creed.

In his walks through Royal Street Aguirre had one stopping place: the entrance to a Hindu bazaar ruled over by a Hindu from Madras named Khiamull. During the first days of his stay he had bought from the shopkeeper various gifts for his first cousins in Madrid, the daughters of an old minister plenipotentiary who helped him in his career. Ever since then Aguirre would stop for a chat with Khiamull, a shrivelled old man, with a greenish tan complexion and mustache of jet black that bristled from his lips like the whiskers of a seal. His gentle, watery eyes—those of an antelope or of some humble, persecuted beast—seemed to caress Aguirre with the softness of velvet. He spoke to the young man in Spanish,