

THE MAYFLOWER

(FLOR DE MAYO)

A TALE OF THE VALENCIAN SEASHORE

BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

BY

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THE MAYFLOWER

CHAPTER I

THE WIDOW'S TAVERN

THE morning of that day—it was a Tuesday of the Lenten season—could not have dawned more promisingly. The sea, off the Cabañal, was in flat calm, as smooth as a polished mirror. Not the slightest ripple broke the shimmering triangular wake that the sun sent shoreward over the lifeless surface of the water.

The fishing fleet had headed, bright and early, for the grounds off the Cabo de San Antonio; and all the seines were out to take full advantage of the perfect weather. Prices on the market of Valencia were running high; and every skipper was trying to make a quick catch and get back first to the beach of the Cabañal, where the fisherwomen were waiting impatiently.

Toward noon the weather changed. An easterly wind came up, the dread *levante*, that can blow so wickedly in the gulf of Valencia. The sea at first

was lightly wrinkled; but as the hurricane advanced the placid looking-glass gave way to a livid menacing chop, and piles of cloud came racing up from the horizon and blotted out the sun.

Great was the alarm along shore. In the eyes of those poor people, familiar with all the tragedies of the sea, wind from that quarter always meant one of those storms that bring sorrow and mourning to the homes of fishermen. In dismay, their skirts whipping in the blow, the women ran back and forth along the water's edge, wailing and praying to all the saints they trusted. The men at home, pale and frowning, bit nervously at the ends of their cigars, and, from the lee of the boats drawn up on the sand, studied the lowering horizon with the tense penetrating gaze of sailormen, or nervously watched the harbor entrance beyond the Breakwater on whose red rocks the first storm waves were breaking. What was happening to so many husbands and fathers caught with their nets down off shore? Each succeeding squall, as it sent the terrified watchers staggering along the beach, called up the thought of strong masts snapping at the level of the deck and triangular sails torn to shreds, perhaps at that very moment!

About three o'clock on the black horizon a line of sails appeared, driving before the gale like puffs of foam that vanished suddenly in the troughs of the waves to dart back into view again on the crests

succeeding. The fleet was returning like a frightened herd in stampede, each boat plunging in the combers with the bellow of the tempest upon its heels. Would they make the lee of the Breakwater? The wind in devilish playfulness would here tear off a shred of canvas, there a yard, and there a mast or a tiller, till a rudderless craft, caught abeam by a mountain of greenish water, would seem surely to be swallowed up. Some of the boats got in. The sailors, drenched to the skin, accepted the embraces of their wives and children impassively, with vacant and expressionless eyes, like corpses suddenly resurrected from the tomb.

That night was long remembered in the Cabañal.

Frenzied women, with their hair down and lashing in the hurricane, their voices hoarse from the prayers they shouted above the howling gale, spent the whole night on the Breakwater, in danger of being swept off by the towering surf, soaked with the brine from the biting spray, and peering out into the blackness as though bent on witnessing the lingering agony of the last stragglers.

Many boats did not appear. Where could they be . . . *ay Diós, Diós!* Happy the women who had their sons and husbands safe in their arms! Other boys were out in that tumbling hell, driving through the night in a floating coffin, tossing from white cap to white cap, dizzily plunging into the yawning trough, while decks groaned beneath their feet, and

gray hills of water curled above to break down upon them in a destroying surge!

It rained all night long. Many women waited out till sunrise, drawing their soaked cloaks about their shivering bodies, kneeling in the black mud and coal-dust on the Breakwater, shrieking their prayers to be sure that God would hear, or, again, in desperate rage, stopping to tear their hair and hurl the most frightful blasphemies of the Fishmarket up toward heaven.

And when dawn came, what a glorious dawn it was! As if nothing at all had happened, the sun lifted a smiling hypocritical face above the line of a clean horizon, and spread a broad uneasy glitter of golden beauty over waters that peacefully carried long streaks of foam from the night's turmoil. The first thing that the rays of morning gilded was the battered hulk of a Norwegian barkentine ashore off the Beach of Nazaret, its nose buried in the sand, its midships awash, its bilges agape and in splinters, while strips of canvas floated from the rigging tangled about the broken masts.

The ship had carried a cargo of Northern lumber. Pushed gently along by the lapping waves, timbers and boards were slowly drifting ashore, where they were dragged out by swarms of black ants and disappeared as though sunk in the sand. And they worked hard, those ants. The storm was just what they had been waiting for. Beach-pirates were

whipping up their horses gayly along all the roads leading to the *huerta* of Ruzafa. Boards like that would make such fine houses! And the booty was all theirs by rights! What did it matter if a girder were stained, perhaps, with the blood of one of those poor foreigners lying dead back there upon the shore?

Groups of idlers were gathered, with a few policemen, around some corpses that were stretched out on the beach some distance from the water. Strong, handsome fellows they had been, light-haired all; and bits of white skin, soft and smooth, though muscular, could be seen through the rents in their garments, while their blue eyes, glassy and staring in death, looked up at the sky with a mysterious fixity.

The Norwegian had been the most sizeable wreck of the blow, and the newspapers in town gave columns to it. The population of Valencia turned out as on a pilgrimage to look at the hulk, half sunken in the shifting sands. No one gave a thought to the lost fishing boats, and people seemed not to understand the wailing and lamentations of the poor women whose men had not come home.

The disaster to the fleet was not, however, so great as they had thought. The morning wore on and several boats came in that had been given up for lost. Some had made Denia or Gandia. Others had taken refuge in Cullera Harbor. And each

craft that appeared roused cheers of rejoicing and thanksgiving throughout the village, which joyfully made vows to all the saints who look after men of the sea.

In the end only one was not accounted for—the boat of *tio* Pascualo, the most thrifty saver of all the savers in the Cabañal, a man, decidedly, with an eye for money, a fisherman in winter and a smuggler in summer, a great skipper, and a frequent visitor to the coasts of Algiers and Oran, which he spoke of always as “across the way,” as though Africa were on the sidewalk across the street.

Pascualo's wife, Tona, spent more than a week on the Breakwater, a suckling baby in her arms and another child, a chubby little lad, clinging to her skirts. She was sure Pascualo would come home; and every time a fresh detail of the storm was given her, she would tear her hair and renew her screams for the Holy Virgin's help. The fishermen never talked right out to her, but always stopped at the significant shrug of the shoulders. They had seen Pascualo last off the Cabo, drifting before the gale, dismasted. He could not have gotten in. One man had even seen a huge green wave break over him, taking the boat abeam, though he could not swear the craft had foundered.

In alternate spells of desperation and strange exhilarated hope, the miserable woman waited and waited with her two children. On the twelfth day,

a revenue cutter came into the port of the Cabañal, towing *tio* Pascualo's boat behind, bottom-up, blackened, slimy and sticky, floating weirdly like a big coffin and surrounded by schools of fish, unknown to local waters, that seemed bent on getting at a bait they scented through the seams of the wrecked hull.

The craft was righted and grounded on the sand. The masts were off even with the deck. The hold was full of water. When the fishermen went down inside to bail her out with pails, their bare feet, entangled in the mess of line and baskets and cordage, stepped finally on something soft. After a first instinctive cry of horrified revulsion, the men reached down under water with their hands and drew out—a corpse.

Tio Pascualo was hardly recognizable. His body was swollen, green, the belly inflated to the point of bursting. The decaying flesh was gnawed away in places by hungry little fishes, some of which, loath to let go their prey, were still clinging to it by their teeth, wriggling their tails and giving an appearance of disgusting life to the horrible mass. The bold sailor's fate was clear. He had been hurled through the hatchway by a lunge of the deck before the boat had been lost. Inside there he had lain with his skull crushed. That boat—the dream of his life, the achievement of thirty years of penny-saving—had proved to be his coffin!

Tio Pascualo's widow, in her hysterical weeping, shrank from the repugnant body. The women of the Cabañal raised their voices in weird lamentation and trooped in company behind the wooden box that was carried at once to the cemetery. For a week *tio Pascualo* was the subject of every conversation. Then people forgot about him, save that the appearance of his mourning widow, with one child in her arms and another at her side, chanced to remind them of his grewsome end.

Tona, indeed, had lost not her husband only. Dire poverty was upon her, not the poverty that is hard but tolerable, but the poverty that is terrifying even to the poor, the want of the homeless and the breadless, the want that holds out a mendicant hand from the street corner to beg a penny and give thanks for a crust of mildewed bread.

Help came readily while her misfortune was fresh in the minds of the villagers. A subscription was taken up among the fisherfolk, and on the proceeds, with other gifts that came in, she was able to get along for three or four months. Then people forgot. Tona was no longer the widow of a man lost at sea. She was a pauper ever on hand with the wail for alms. Many doors were at last shut in her face, and old friends of her girlhood, who had always welcomed her with a smile, now looked the other way when she went by.

But Tona was not the woman to be crushed by

general ostracism. *Eah!* Enough of this bawling! We've got to get out of the dumps! She was a woman with two arms like any other, and two brats that could eat and eat and eat!

She had nothing left in the world but the wreck of her husband's boat, in which he had died. It lay rotting out there on the beach, high and dry, now soaked by the rains, now oozing tar under the flaming sun, the mosquitos breeding in the muck inside.

Tona suddenly had an idea. That boat might be good for something. It had killed the father of those tots of hers. Why should it not help to feed them? *Tio* Mariano, a tight-fisted bachelor, first cousin to the late Pascualo, and supposed to be quite well off, had taken a liking to the widow's children; and however much it pained him, he went down into his pocket and gave her the money to make her start.

In one side of the boat a hole was sawed to make a door and a small counter. Against the wall inside some barrels of wine, gin and brandy were ranged in line. The deck was taken off and replaced with a roof of tarred boards, to give head-room, at least, in the dingy hovel. At the bow and at the stern two portholes were cut, and two partitions were set up with the boards remaining—one "stateroom" for the widow, the other for the boys. A shelter with a thatched roof was raised in front

of the door; under it a couple of rickety tables, and as many as half a dozen bamboo tabourets. The whole outfit made quite a show. The hulk of death became a beach café within easy reach of the *casa del bòus*, the barn where the oxen for beaching and launching the boats were kept, and at the very place where the fish was brought ashore and where some one was always around.

The women folks of the Cabañal began to rub their eyes. That Tona was the Devil himself! See what an eye she had for business! Her gin and brandy went by the barreland. The men who used to go to the taverns in town now got their drinks right there of her. They were always playing *truque y flor* on the shaky tables under the shelter while waiting for the boats to put to sea, brightening up the games with glass after glass of *caña*, which Tona averred was genuine imported Cuban rum.

Tio Pascualo's stranded craft went sailing, wind astern, on a new voyage toward prosperity. Out there on the rocking sea with the old skipper's seines, the boat had never earned so much as now under the widow's charge, though its seams were open and its timbers were rotting away. Evidence of profit could have been found in the successive transformations the old hulk kept undergoing. First curtains went up on the stateroom windows, and if you looked inside, you saw new coverlets of down, and white

sheets. A coffee percolator began to shine like polished gold on the counter. The shelter outside the door grew longer and longer, with more tables and better ones. A dozen hens or more began to cluck about over the white sand, bossed by a wicked rooster with a tenor voice who was more than a match for any stray dog that came along looking for trouble. From a pen nearby echoed the grunts of a hog too fat to breathe without disturbing the neighborhood. And in front of the counter, outside the hull, were two stoves with rice and fish sputtering fragrantly in oil in their respective frying-pans. A going concern, no doubt of that! Not a question of getting rich, you understand, but a bite to eat for the boys! And Tona would smile and rub her hands gloatingly. Not a cent did she owe in the world. The ceiling of the boat was festooned with dry *morcillas* and shiny *sobreasadas*—her favorite sausages; and there were strips of smoked tunny, and a ham or two sprinkled with red pepper. The barrels were full of drink. Along the shelves stretched an array of bottles with liqueurs of every color. And the pots and pans hanging on the walls could be set sizzling in an instant with all kinds of good nourishing victuals. Just think of it! A widow starving a short time since, and now already on Easy Street! Say all you want—but God looks after decent people!

With plenty to eat and nothing to worry about,

Tona seemed to grow young again. Inside her boat there she took on a glowing well-fed buxomness, and her skin, protected from the sun and brine, lost that harsh baked bronze of the women who worked along shore. When serving at the counter her ample breast sported inevitably one of an endless assortment of colored handkerchiefs, *tomate y huevo*, complicated arabesques of tomato red and egg yellow worked into thick well woven silk.

She could even afford purely decorative luxuries. Above the wine casks at the back of the "shop" the whitewashed timbers screamed aloud with cheap high colored chromos that reduced Tona's neckwear to silence, quite. The fishermen drinking outside under the shelter would look up over the counter and feast their eyes on "The Lion Hunt," "The Death of the Good Man and the Sinner," "The Ladder of Life," not to mention a half dozen miracle-workers with Saint Anthony in the place of honor; and a cartoon showing the lean merchant who trusts, and the fat one who sells for cash, with the customary legend: "If you want credit, come back to-morrow!"

Tona could be quite properly satisfied at the relative comfort in which her young ones were growing up. Business was getting better and better, and an old stocking which she kept hidden between the foot board of her bunk and the big mattress there,

was gradually filling with the silver *douros* she had saved.

Sometimes she could contain her happiness no longer; and to view her good fortune in perspective, as it were, she would walk down to the fringe of the surf, and look back with welling eyes at the hen coop, the open-air kitchen, the sonorous pig-pen, and finally the boat itself, its bow and stern projecting from a maze of fences, cane-work and thatch, and painted a clean dazzling white like some bark of dream-land tossed by a hurricane into a barnyard.

Not that life did not still have its hardships for her. She got little sleep. To begin with, she had to be up at sunrise every morning, and oftentimes, after midnight, when boats would make shore late or be leaving before dawn, the fishermen would start banging on her door and she would have to get up and serve them. These early morning sprees were the ones that made most money, though they caused her most uneasiness on the whole. She knew whom she was dealing with. Ashore for a few hours after a week at sea, those men wanted all the pleasures of land crowded into minutes of pure joy. They lighted on wine like flies on honey. If the older men soon fell asleep with their pipes dead between their teeth, not so the sturdier boys, aflame from the privations and abstinence of life at sea.

They would look at *siñá* Tona in ways that would bring gestures of annoyance from her and make her wonder how she could fight off the brutal caresses of those Tritons in striped shirts.

She had never been a beauty; but her trace of fleshiness, her big black eyes that seemed to brighten a clean brownish countenance, and especially the light wrapper she would hurriedly throw on to attend to her nocturnal patronage, lent her charm in the eyes of those healthy youths who laid their courses toward the Valencian shore with joyous anticipation of a sight of *siñá* Tona.

But Tona was a woman of brain and brawn, and she knew how to handle those fellows. She bestowed no favors. When their words were overbold she would answer with disdain. To nudge she replied with cuffs, and once when a sailor seized her suddenly from behind, she laid him flat with a well placed kick, tough as iron and sturdy as a mainmast though he was.

She would have no love affairs, even if other women did! A man would never touch the end of her little finger, no siree! The idea, besides! A mother of two children, little angels, sleeping there behind one thickness of boards—you could hear them breathe, even—and she alone in the world to support them!

The future of the boys was beginning to cause the mother hours of thought. They had been growing