

THE ENEMIES OF WOMEN

By *VICENTE BLASCO IBAÑEZ*

Translated from the Spanish by IRVING BROWN



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CHAPTER I

THE Prince repeated his statement :

"Man's greatest wisdom consists in getting along without women."

He intended to go on but was interrupted. There was a slight stir of the heavy window curtains. Through their parting was seen below, as in a frame, the intense azure of the Mediterranean. A dull roar reached the dining-room. It seemed to come from the side of the house facing the Alps. It was a faint vibration, deadened by the walls, the curtains, and the carpets, distant, like the working of some underground monster; but there rose above the sound of revolving steel and the puffing of steam a clamour of human beings, a sudden burst of shouts and whistling.

"A train full of soldiers!" exclaimed Don Marcos Toledo, leaving his chair.

"The Colonel is at it again, always the hero, always enthusiastic about everything that has to do with his profession," said Atilio Castro, with a smile of amusement.

In spite of his years, the man whom they called the Colonel sprang to the nearest window. Above the foliage of the sloping garden, he could see a small section of the Corniche railroad, swallowed up in the smoky entrance of a tunnel, and reappearing farther on, beyond the hill, among the groves and rose coloured villas of Cap Martin. Under the midday sun the rails quivered like rills of molten steel. Although the train had not yet reached this side of the tunnel, the whole countryside was filled with the ever-increasing roar. The windows, terraces, and gardens

of the villas were dotted black with people who were leaving their luncheon tables to see the train pass. From the mountain slope to the seashore, from walls and buildings on both sides of the track, flags of all colours began to wave.

Don Marcos ran to the opposite window overlooking the city. All he could see was an expanse of roofs with no trace of Nature's touch save here and there the feathery green of the gardens against the red of the tiles. It was like a stage setting broken into a succession of wings: in the foreground, amid trees, isolated villas with green balustrades and flower-strewn walls; next, the mass of Monte Carlo, its huge hotels bristling with pointed turrets and cupolas; and hazy in the background, as though floating in golden dust, the rocky cliffs of Monaco, with its promenades; the enormous pile of the Oceanographic Museum; the New Cathedral, a glaring white; and the square crested tower of the palace of the Prince. Buildings stretched from the edge of the sea halfway up the mountains. It was a country without fields, with no open land, covered completely with houses, from one frontier to the other.

But Don Marcos had known the view for years, and at once detected the unfamiliar detail. A long, interminable train was moving slowly along the hillside. He counted aloud more than forty cars, without coming to the rear coaches still hidden in a hollow.

"It must be a battalion . . . a whole battalion on a war footing. More than a thousand soldiers," he said in an authoritative manner, pleased at showing off his keen professional judgment before his fellow guests, who, for that matter, were not listening.

The train was filled with men, tiny yellowish grey figures, that gathered at the car windows, doors, and on the running-boards with their feet hanging over the track. Others were crowded in cattle pens or stood on the open flat-cars, among the tanks and crated machine guns. A great many had climbed to the roofs and were greeting the crowds with arms and legs extended in the shape of a letter X. Almost all of them had their shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows, like sailors preparing to manoeuvre.

"They are English!" exclaimed Don Marcos. "English soldiers on their way to Italy!"

But this information seemed to irritate the Prince, who always spoke to him in familiar language, in spite of the difference in their ages. "Don't be absurd, Colonel. Anybody would know that. They are the only ones who whistle."

The men still seated at the table nodded. Military trains passed every day, and from a distance it was possible to guess the nationality of the passengers. "The French," said Castro, "go past silently. They have had a little over three years of fighting on their own soil. They are as silent and gloomy as their duty is monotonous and endless. The Italians coming from the French front sing, and decorate their trains with green branches. The English shout like a lot of boys, just out of school, and in their enthusiasm, whistle all the time. They are the real children in this war; they go with a sort of boyish glee to their death."

The whistling sound drew nearer, shrill as the howling of a witches' Sabbath. It passed between the mountains and the gardens of Villa Sirena; and then went on in the other direction, toward Italy, gradually growing fainter as it disappeared in the tunnel. Toledo, who was the only one in the room to watch the train pass, noticed how the houses, gardens, and *potagers* on both sides of the track were alive with people, waving handkerchiefs and flags in reply to the whistling of the English. Even along the seashore the fishermen stood up on the seats of their boats and waved their caps at a distant train. The quick ear of Don Marcos distinguished a sound of footsteps on the floor above. The servants doubtless were opening the windows to join with silent enthusiasm in that farewell.

When only a few coaches were still visible at the mouth of the tunnel, the Colonel came back to his place at the table.

"More meat for the slaughter house!" exclaimed Atilio Castro, looking at the Prince. "The racket is over. Go on, Michael."

Under Toledo's watchful eye, two beardless Italian boys, unprepossessing in appearance, were serving the dessert at the luncheon.

The Colonel kept glancing over the table and at the faces of his three guests, as though he were afraid of suddenly noticing something that would show the lunch had been hastily arranged. It was the first that had been given at Villa Sirena for two years.

The master of the house, Prince Michael Fedor Lubimoff, who sat at the head of the table, had arrived from Paris the evening before.

The Prince was a man still in his youth, fresh with the well controlled vigour that is furnished by a life of physical exercise. He was tall, robust, and supple, of dark complexion, with large grey eyes, and a massive face, clean shaven. The scattered grey hairs at his temples seemed even more numerous in contrast with the blue-black of the rest. A number of premature wrinkles around the eyes, and two deep furrows running from his wide nostrils to the corners of his mouth, were the first indication of weariness in a powerful organism that seemed to have lived too intensely, in the mistaken confidence that its reserve of strength was endless.

The Colonel called him "Your Highness," as if Michael Fedor were a member of a ruling house, instead of a mere Russian prince. But this was when some one was present. It was a habit Don Marcos had adopted in the days of the late Princess Lubimoff, to maintain the prestige of the son, whom he had known since the latter was a child. In their intimate relations, when they were alone, he preferred to call him "Marquis," Marquis de Villablanca, and the Prince was never successful in disturbing, by his witticisms on the subject, the precedence thus established by Don Marcos in his terms of respect. The title of Russian Prince was for those who are dazzled by the lofty sound of titles, without being able to appreciate their respective merits, and origins; as for himself, the Colonel preferred something nobler, the title of Spanish Marquis, in spite of the fact that that title for Lubimoff was quite unknown in Spain, and lacked official recognition.

Toledo was well acquainted with Prince Michael's three guests.

Atilio Castro was a fellow countryman, a Spaniard who had spent the greater part of his life outside his own country. He affected great intimacy with the Prince and, on the grounds of a distant blood relationship between them, even spoke to him with some familiarity. Don Marcos had a vague idea that the young Spaniard had been a consul somewhere for a short time. Atilio was continually poking fun at him without his being always immediately aware of it. But the Colonel, seeing that it pleased "His Highness" greatly, felt no ill-will on that account.

"A fine fellow, good hearted!" the Colonel often said, in speaking of Castro. "He hasn't led a model life, he's a terrible gambler—but a gentleman. Yes, sir, a real gentleman!"

Michael Fedor defined his relative in other terms.

"He has all the vices, and no defects."

Don Marcos could never quite understand what that meant, but nevertheless it increased his esteem for Castro.

The Prince was only two or three years older than Atilio, and yet their ages seemed much farther apart. Castro was over thirty-five, and some people thought him twenty-four. His face had an ingenuous, rather childlike expression, and it acquired a certain character of manliness, thanks solely to a dark red moustache, closely cropped. This tiny moustache, and his glossy hair parted squarely in the middle, were the most prominent details of his features, except when he became excited. If his humour changed—which happened very rarely—the lustre in his eyes, the contraction of his mouth, and the premature wrinkles in his forehead gave him an almost ominous expression, and suddenly he seemed to age by ten years.

"A bad man to have for an enemy!" affirmed the Colonel. "It wouldn't do to get in his way."

And not out of fear, but rather out of sincere admiration did the Colonel speak admiringly of Castro's talents. He wrote poetry, painted in water colour, improvised songs at the piano, gave advice in matters of furniture and

clothes, and was well versed in antiquities, and matters of taste. Don Marcos knew no limits to that intelligence.

"He knows everything," he would say. "If he would only stick to one thing! If he would only work!"

Castro was always elegantly dressed, and lived in expensive hotels; but he had no regular income so far as was known. The Colonel suspected a series of friendly little loans from the Prince. But the latter had remained away from Monte Carlo almost since the beginning of the war, and Don Marcos used to meet Castro every winter living at the Hotel de Paris, playing at the Casino, and associating with people of wealth. From time to time, on encountering the Colonel in the gaming rooms, Castro had asked him for a loan of "ten louis," an absolute necessity for a gambler who had just lost his last stake and was anxious to recoup. But with more or less delay he had always returned the money. There was something mysterious about his life, according to Don Marcos.

The two other guests seemed to him to live much less complex lives. The one who had frequented the house for the longest period, was a dark young man, with a skin that was almost copper coloured, a slight build, and long, straight hair. He was Teofilo Spadoni, a famous pianist. Spadoni's parents were Italian—this much was sure. No one could quite make out where he had been born. At times he mentioned his birthplace as Cairo, at other times, as Athens, or Constantinople, all the places where his father, a poor Neapolitan tailor, had lived. No one was astonished by such vagaries and absent-minded discrepancies on the part of the extraordinary virtuoso, who, the moment he left the piano, seemed to move in a world of dreams and to be quite incapable of adapting himself to any regular mode of life. After giving concerts in the large capitals of Europe and South America, he had settled down at Monte Carlo, explaining his residence there by the war, while Don Marcos imputed it to his love of gambling. The Prince knew him through having engaged him as a member of the orchestra on board his large yacht, the *Gaviota II*, for a voyage around the world.

Sitting beside the host was the last guest, the latest to

frequent the house, a pale young man, tall, thin, and near-sighted, who was always looking timidly around as though ill at ease. He was a professor from Spain, a Doctor of Science, Carlos Novoa, who received a subsidy from the Spanish government to make certain studies in ocean fauna at the Oceanographic Museum. The Colonel, who had spent many years at Monte Carlo without running across any of his compatriots, other than those whom he saw around the roulette tables, had expressed a certain patriotic pride in meeting this professor two months previously.

"A man of learning! A famous scientist!" he exclaimed in speaking of his new friend. "They can say all they want now about us Spaniards being ingoramuses."

He had only the vaguest notion of the nature of his fellow countryman's learning. What is more; from his earliest conversations he had guessed that the professor's ideas were directly opposed to his own. "One of those heretics with no other God than matter," he said to himself. But he added by way of consolation: "All those learned men are like that: liberals and free-thinkers. What of it. . . ." As for the professor's fame, in the opinion of Don Marcos it was unquestionable. Otherwise why would they have sent him to the Oceanographic Museum, large and white as a temple, whose halls he had visited only once, with a feeling of awe that had prevented him from ever going back again.

On the occasional evenings when the professor would go to Monte Carlo and chance to meet Don Marcos, the latter would present him to his friends as a national celebrity. In this fashion Novoa had made the acquaintance of Castro and Spadoni, who never asked him more than how his luck was going.

When the coming of the Prince was announced, Toledo insisted that his illustrious friend the Professor should accompany him to the station in order to lose no time in introducing him to "His Highness."

"One of our country's prides. . . . Your Highness is so fond of everything Spanish."

Michael Fedor had spent a considerable portion of his life on the sea, and felt a certain sympathy for the modest

young man, on learning of the studies in which he specialised.

They talked for a long time about oceanography, and the following day Prince Michael, who was in the habit of entertaining elaborately at his table the most divergent kinds of guests, said to his "chamberlain":

"Your scholar is a very fine fellow. Invite him to luncheon."

The guests all spoke Spanish. Spadoni was able to follow the conversation, with the little he had picked up while giving piano recitals in Buenos Ayres, Santiago, and other South American capitals. He had been there with an impresario, who finally got tired of backing him and struggling with his childish irresponsibility.

As they were sitting down at the table, the Colonel noticed that the Prince seemed preoccupied with some absorbing meditation. He made a point of talking with Professor Novoa, expressing his surprise at the slight compensation the scientist received for his studies.

Castro and Spadoni gave their whole attention to their food. The days of the famous chef, to whom Prince Michael gave a salary worthy of a Prime Minister, were over. The "master" had been mobilized and at that moment was cooking for a general on the French front. However, Toledo had managed to discover a woman of some fifty years, whose combinations were less varied, perhaps, than those of the artist whom the war had snatched away, but more "classical," more solid and substantial—and the two men ate with the delight of people who, for ever obliged to eat in restaurants and hotels, at last find themselves at a table where no economy or falsifications are practised.

About dessert time the conversation, becoming general, turned, as always happens when men are dining alone, to the subject of women. Toledo had a feeling that the Prince had gently steered the guest's talk in this direction. Suddenly Michael summed up his whole argument by declaring a second time:

"Man's greatest wisdom consists in getting along without women."