

*THE Peacock*

*SHEDS  
HIS TAIL*

*Alice Tisdale Hobart*

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by

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## **THE PEACOCK SHEDS HIS TAIL**

By ALICE TISDALE HOBART

*Pioneering Where the World Is Old*

*By the City of Long Sand*

*Within the Walls of Nanking*

*River Supreme*

*Oil for the Lamps of China*

*Yang and Yin*

*Their Own Country*

*The Cup and the Sword*

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*To*  
MY HUSBAND  
EARLE TISDALE HOBART  
*and*  
MY FAMILY  
MARY,  
RAY,  
TYLER,  
*and*  
EDWIN NOURSE

## FOREWORD

It is perhaps unnecessary to state that except for the historical figures in this book all the characters are fictional. Should the name of any fictional character be that of a living person it is by coincidence.

For the purposes of fiction I have found it necessary in a few cases to shorten or lengthen the time between historical events. For instance, the celebration over the confiscated wells came sometime after the taking over, whereas I have placed it on the next day. Also I have not always adhered to the exact dates in the historical events of the Church.

I have also not differentiated the customs of the Indian villages as an anthropologist would. Rather I have tried to catch the significance of the Indian life, accrediting to one village the customs that best illustrate the Indian outlook. The hacienda village is thus a composite one.

The material for the celebration of the dead on All Souls' Day in Chapter 6 is taken from René d'Harnoncourt's article "The Fiesta as a Work of Art," from the book *Renascent Mexico*. The material is used by permission of Mr. d'Harnoncourt and the Crown Publishers.

The poem "Sister Water" is taken from the book *Some Spanish-American Poets*. It is a translation by Alice Stone Blackwell of a Spanish-American poem. It is used by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.





THE PEACOCK SHEDS HIS TAIL



# 1

THE GREAT land mass of North America, which in the United States offers vast stretches of fertile prairie and productive valleys, tapers out in Mexico. As the continent narrows down, the Sierras take over shaping the land. Huge blocks of rock and earth, tilted at precipitous angles, thrust the valleys up—five, six, seven thousand feet above the sea. From the central plateau, the mountains drop away like steppingstones, valley by valley, to the lowlands lying along the coasts.

Mexico is strangely different from the States except where the two countries join. There the earth is a flat, sandy desert, with no outstanding feature to mark the difference between the two nations sprung from such unlike roots.

Each of these nations has gone through a series of struggles for liberty—the last phase of Mexico's struggle so recent that in 1925 the country still reeled from the fierce internal strife. In 1910 the centennial of Mexico's freedom from Spain was observed. There was elaborate celebration in Mexico City. But in the villages over the country the *rurales*, in dove-colored uniforms with silver buttons and silver-mounted revolvers at their belts, held the Mexican people in subjection. Opportunity, under Díaz, president in name, dictator in fact, was for the native Spaniard and the foreign businessman. The Mexican, in bitter mirth, called himself the stepchild of his own country.

In that centennial year revolution broke out. There was a decade of fighting and bloodshed; then the generals made peace among themselves. It was an uneasy peace, for the cry of the revolutionists, "Land, work, and liberty," was still but half answered.

It was September—season of harvest and of festival in Mexico. All over the country, on the big estates and the small plots of the peasants, the corn stood high and golden under the sun.

The clouds which only a few weeks before had arrayed themselves each morning behind the piled-up jumble of mountains that encircle

the city of Mexico, waiting to advance in the afternoon and drench the earth, had retreated to the four points of the compass. The rainy season was over. The sun day after day spread its uninterrupted brilliance over the lofty city set in its valley seven thousand feet above the sea. In the thin air, the rose and gray volcanic rock of the colonial dwellings, palaces, and churches took on a luminous, opalescent tone. The cleansing sunlight fell, too, over the rim of the city—a recently shrinking circle of poverty where men lived in caves hollowed out of slag heaps or huts roofed over with tin and straw.

Don Julián Navarro's colonial house, one of the oldest in the city, was a thing of austere beauty. Usually it looked proudly aloof, held to itself behind the iron grilles of its windows placed one above the other, story upon story, its great iron gate, leading to the street, closed except to admit family and guests. But today from morning until night it stood open. While the patio was still heavily shadowed by the high walls of the house, the gatekeeper Francisco rose from his sleeping mat and picked up his keys, grumbling. "The roosters have not begun their crowing on the housetops of the city, and yet I must open the gate."

Alejandra the cook stood, baskets in hand, waiting for him to find the keyhole. "Old fool," she muttered, angry with his clumsiness. He should have the Indian's skilled hands, like hers when she deftly patted out *tortillas*. "Since a very long time have you been fitting the key in," she scolded. "You're drunk, fumbling like that for the hole. I'm the one to grumble, with my tired legs going to the market before they stopped moving yesterday in preparations for today's fiesta, but I do not grumble—because it is for our Conchita." She pulled her blue *rebozo* tighter over her shoulders and across her broad, stout back and went out.

All morning servants and messengers passed back and forth, bent on important affairs. Don Julián's granddaughter Concepción—Concha as she was lovingly called by her family—was fifteen today. At noon there was to be a special Mass at the Church of San Francisco, and afterward, here at the house, the fiesta—Concha's coming-out party—would be held. There would be a banquet and dancing.

The service at the church was in fulfillment of a vow Concha's mother had made when her daughter was eight. The child had been very ill. The last Sacraments had been given her. Then

Concha's mother had besought the Virgin to intercede for her recovery, taking a vow that if the child were spared, her womanhood should be dedicated to the Virgin.

Concha's grandmother, Doña María Navarro, had arranged that the vow should be carried out in a public ceremony similar to a wedding. Such a dedication of the young girl's maturity would signify her readiness for marriage. The Church had willingly granted Doña María's request.

Don Julián made his own interpretation of this service. He knew his wife was anxious to bring to fruition a long-cherished plan to unite the two great Spanish-American families—her own and that of her friend, Doña Leonora Fuentes de Lara. Ramón, Doña Leonora's son, was a few years older than Concha. By this emphasis on Concha's maturity, her grandmother hoped to bring Concha's betrothal to Ramón to the point of immediate negotiation.

Now, as the day drew on toward noon, Doña María led her family down the long flight of stairs to the patio where automobiles stood ready to take them to the church. First came Don Julián and Doña María, then Concha's father and mother, then Concha herself in bridal white, followed by her brother Ignacio and her sister Louisa.

"Concha, you will ride with your grandfather and me. I wish to see that your dress is not crushed before you enter the church. And you, too, Louisa. I want your dress to be fresh." Doña María motioned the others into the second car. Francisco threw wide the two halves of the gate and the cars rolled out.

At the church Concha, leaning on her father's arm and followed by her friends, Louisa among them, in fragile dresses of blue, pink, and green, and wearing large picture hats, walked up the aisle to the front of the church.

The priest, preceded by acolytes, came to the altar alight with candles and placed the Chalice before the tabernacle. Reverently he began the Mass, the choir reverently accompanying him. The Kyrie, Gloria, and Credo came to an end. "*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,*" chanted the priest as the bell rang thrice. Concha and all the rich and poor filling the great church knelt, as silently they joined the priest in his spoken prayers of commemoration. Placing his hands over the bread and the wine the reverend Father whispered, "This is My Body. . . . This is the Chalice of My Blood. . . ." In adoration all

lifted their eyes to the Host and then to the Chalice as each was elevated. The sacred moment passed. There was a slight stir. The choir began the beautiful *Agnus Dei*.

The time for Concha's dedication to the Blessed Mother had come. Slowly she walked beyond the communion rail, knelt at the top of the altar steps. Two, then three, then four, then six of her maids knelt on the steps below. They were like a court train feathered with color spread out behind the small, white, kneeling figure above.

The tabernacle had its gem-encrusted door closed now, protecting the consecrated bread and wine. Three gold candlesticks with tall wax tapers flanked the tabernacle and to the left and right of the altar, slender tapers set in seven-branched candlesticks mounted on gold pedestals threw their shimmering flames upward. On each side of the step where Concha knelt one great candelabrum completed the path of light from the altar to her.

The priest stood facing her. His white alb and gold chasuble shone as if compounded of light itself. The bright red cassocks and lace surplices of the acolytes blended their color into the radiant scene.

Now the priest instructed the kneeling girl in the duties of womanhood and accepted her promise to be guided by the Virgin Mother. Then he recited the communal prayer:

"Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope; to thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve;

Turn then, most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed Fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary."

The prayer ended, the priest raised his right hand, brown against the white sleeve of his alb, in blessing: "*In nomine Patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti. Amen.*"

Seated below among the family, Concha's mother prayed. "O all understanding Virgin Mother, who conceived without sin and who has borne sorrow in the death of thy divine Son, intercede for this small sweet child of mine, that she be given purity of mind and grace and simplicity, and if it is the will of thy Son, may she know love."

Mamá Grande's shrewd eyes took in every detail. Concha was just as she had intended she should be—not merely a beautiful girl as others were beautiful, but a figure distinctive and touched with mystery.

Don Julián stood by the railing of the gallery on the second floor of his house, where he could see the spacious patio below. The two stairways curving to the landing and the single flight which led to the second floor were filled with guests. Young girls, their mothers, fathers, and aunts were ascending. When Ramón's family came up the stairs, Don Julián met them and escorted them into the drawing room, where Concha stood between her mother and grandmother. Doña María welcomed Doña Leonora and her son, her face set in traditional well-bred serenity.

"María," Ramón's mother exclaimed, "how touching the presentation in the church! You have set the families of the city an example of piety."

Doña María Navarro did not reply. She was exasperated with her friend. What pig's eyes Ramón's mother has, little black balls with no white! she thought maliciously. She knows I want her to say how desirable Concha was in her bridal white, kneeling at the altar.

Don Julián's gaze rested on his granddaughter. She still wore the white dress, but not the white lace veil, she had worn in the church. Her great black eyes were bright now, not somber as they had been just after her dedication to the Virgin. But whatever their expression, he felt they gave her the innocence of his favorite Madonna, the beautiful little Virgin of white alabaster which stood in a niche in his library at the top of the house.

Not so Louisa, her sister. Although Louisa was two years younger than Concha, her knowing agate-colored eyes made her seem older—older even than Ignacio, their brother, who was seventeen. Louisa's dress of jade green set off her delicate olive skin strikingly in contrast with her pale yellow hair. She was aware, Don Julián could see, of the effectiveness of her costume, as she talked with a group of young men. From their delighted faces, he gathered that her witty, sometimes sharp, tongue was not well under control. Her mother evidently was aware of it, too, for she went over to the group. She would see that Louisa held strictly to the conventions. A young girl's acquaintance with the other sex must be held within the bounds of



propriety, a courtly bow, graceful conversation. To many of these young men, already familiar with Paris and the Riviera, knowledge of women had already reached the point of satiation. The attraction of marriage lay in the inaccessibility of these wellborn girls, their exquisite innocence.

All of his grandchildren were handsome, as Don Julián appraised them this afternoon—his grandson, who was the center of a group of admiring young women, perhaps the most handsome. He had the long narrow face of his Spanish ancestors and their aristocratic features. If only Ramón were as distinguished-looking as Ignacio! Ramón was the short, compact type of Spaniard. He looks durable, was Don Julián's conclusion, but not romantic.

At last everyone was seated around the table that ran the length of the banquet hall. Gratefully Don Julián broke his twelve-hour fast, kept in preparation for Concha's consecration. He tasted the dry Spanish ham of the entree. It was perfect; aged for years, deep red, sliced to paper thinness. He sipped his wine. His wife, Doña María, knew how to provide.

Ramón's mother, sitting next him, said, "I hear there has been some surveying of your sugar land. You are intending to sell?" Her eyes were bright with cunning.

"You know as well as I do the surveyors are government-sent. This Calles they made President last year has a passion for the reforms started during the Revolution. He'd give all our land to the Indian villages if we'd let him. I'm ready for his representatives next time. My overseer has orders to shoot anyone who trespasses."

"Gently, gently," Doña Leonora cautioned. Then, leaning near, she said in a low tone, "There are better ways, Julián. Have you ever known a Mexican who could not be bought—little officials, big officials? Why not try it? And visit your haciendas. It is not good to be absent." She shrugged her shoulders, turned to the man on her right.

Don Julián fiddled with the food on his plate, his mind caught again in a web of nostalgia for the days of Porfirio Díaz, eight times made President. Opportunity then had been for the native Spaniard like himself and the foreign businessman. All had seemed so gay in that year of 1910, with Mexico City given over to celebration. The