BLASCO IBÁÑEZ VICENTE

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Содержание

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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.

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 broad-brimmed 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, 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 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 week 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 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 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 on which he arrived, even before night-fall, 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 embroidered 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, cafés and more cafés, 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 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 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, cleanshaven 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, 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 wisdom… 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 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 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 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, mixing among his words, which were pronounced with an Andalusian accent, a number of rare terms from distant tongues that he had picked up in his travels. He had journeyed over half the world for the company by whom he was now employed. He spoke of his life at the Cape, at Durban, in the Philippines, at Malta, with a weary expression. Sometimes he looked young; at others his features contracted with an appearance of old age. Those of his race seem to be ageless. He recalled his far-off land of the sun, with the melancholy voice of an exile; his great sacred river, the flower-crowned Hindu virgins, slender and gracefully curved, showing from between the thick jewelled jacket and their linen folds a bronze stomach as beautiful as that of a marble figure. Ah!… When he would accumulate the price of his return thither, he would certainly join his lot to that of a maiden with large eyes and a breath of roses, scarcely out of childhood. Meanwhile he lived like an ascetic fakir amongst the Westerners, unclean folks with whom he was willing to transact business but with

whom he avoided all unnecessary contact. Ah, to return yonder! Not to die far from the sacred river!… And as he expressed his intimate wishes to the inquisitive Spaniard who questioned him concerning the distant lands of light and mystery, the Hindu coughed painfully, his face becoming darker than ever, as if the blood that was circulating beneath the bronze of his skin had turned green.

At times Aguirre, as if waking from a dream, would ask himself what he was doing there in Gibraltar. Since he had arrived with the intention of sailing at once, three large vessels had passed the strait bound for the Oceanic lands. And he had allowed them to sail on, pretending not to know of their presence, never being able to learn the exact conditions of his voyage, writing to Madrid, to his influential uncle, letters in which he spoke of vague ailments that for the moment delayed his departure. Why?… Why?…

Upon arising, the day following his arrival at Gibraltar, Aguirre looked through the window curtains of his room with all the curiosity of a newcomer. The heavens were clouded; it was an October sky; but it was warm,—a muggy, humid warmth that betrayed the proximity of the African coast.

Upon the flat roof of a neighboring house he noticed a strange construction,—a large arbor made of woven reeds and thatched with green branches. Within this fragile abode, he was able to make out through its bright curtains a long table, chairs, and an old-fashioned lamp hanging from the top… What a queer whim

of these people who, having a house, chose to live upon the roof!

A hotel attendant, while he put Aguirre's room in order, answered all his inquiries. The Jews of Gibraltar were celebrating a holiday, the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the most important observances of the year. It was in memory of the long wandering of the Israelites through the desert. In commemoration of their sufferings the Jews were supposed to eat in the open air, in a tabernacle that resembled the tents and huts of their forefathers. The more fanatic of them, those most attached to ancient customs, ate standing, with a staff in their hands, as if ready to resume their journey after the last mouthful. The Hebrew merchants of the central street erected their structures on the roof; those of the poor quarters built theirs in a yard or corral, wherever they could catch a glimpse of the open sky. Those who, because of their extreme poverty, lived in a shanty, were invited to dine in company with the more fortunate, with that fraternity of a race compelled by hatred and persecution to preserve a firm solidarity.

The tabernacle Aguirre saw was that of old Aboab and his son, brokers who kept their establishment on the selfsame Royal Street, just a few doors below. And the servant pronounced the name Aboab (father and son) with that mingling of superstitious awe and hatred which is inspired in the poor by wealth that is considered unjustly held. All Gibraltar knew them; it was the same in Tangier, and the same in Rabat and Casablanca. Hadn't the gentleman heard of them? The son directed the business of

the house, but the father still took part, presiding over all with his venerable presence and that authority of old age which is so infallible and sacred among Hebrew families.

"If you could only see the old man!" added the attendant, with his Andalusian accent. "A white beard that reaches down to his waist, and if you'd put it into hot water it would yield more than a pitcherful of grease. He's almost as greasy as the grand Rabbi, who's the bishop among them.... But he has lots of money. Gold ounces by the fistful, pounds sterling by the shovel; and if you'd see the hole he has in the street for his business you'd be amazed. A mere poor man's kitchen. It seems impossible that he can store so much there!"

After breakfast, when Aguirre went back to his room in search of his pipe, he saw that the Aboab tabernacle was occupied by the whole family. At the back, which was in semi-obscurity, he seemed to make out a white head presiding over the table and on each side elbows leaning upon the tablecloth, and the skirts and trousers of persons who were for the most part invisible.

Two women came out on the roof; they were both young, and after glancing for a moment at the inquisitive fellow in the hotel window, turned their gaze in a different direction, as if they had not noticed him. To Aguirre these Aboab daughters were not very impressive, and he wondered whether the much vaunted beauty of Jewesses was but another of the many lies admitted by custom, consecrated by time and accepted without investigation. They had large eyes, of bovine beauty; moist and dilated, but with the

addition of thick, prominent eyebrows, as black and continuous as daubs of ink. Their nostrils were wide and the beginnings of obesity already threatened to submerge their youthful slenderness in corpulence.

They were followed by another woman, doubtless the mother, who was so fat that her flesh shook as she moved. Her eyes, too, were attractive, but were spoiled by the ugly eyebrows. Her nose, her lower lip and the flesh of her neck hung loosely; in her there was already completed the fatal maturity which was beginning to appear in her daughters. All three possessed the yellowish pallor characteristic of Oriental races. Their thick lips, faintly blue, revealed something of the African element grafted upon their Asiatic origin.

"Hola! What's this!" murmured Aguirre with a start.

A fourth woman had come out from the depths of the tabernacle. She must be English; the Spaniard was certain of this. Yes, she was an English brunette, with a bluish cast to her dark skin and a slim, athletic figure whose every movement was graceful. A creole from the colonies, perhaps, born of some Oriental beauty and a British soldier.

She looked without any bashfulness toward the window of the hotel, examining the Spaniard with the leisurely glance of a bold boy, meeting the shock of his eyes without flinching. Then she wheeled about on her heel as if beginning a dancing figure, turned her back to the Spaniard and leaned against the shoulders of the two other young ladies, thrusting them aside and taking

pleasure, to the accompaniment of loud outbursts of laughter, in pushing their unwieldy persons with her vigorous, boyish arms.

When all the women returned to the interior of the tabernacle, Aguirre abandoned his lookout, more and more convinced of the exactness of his observations. Decidedly, she was not a Jewess. And the better to convince himself, he talked at the door with the manager of the hotel, who knew all Gibraltar. After a few words this man guessed to whom Aguirre was referring.

"That's Luna… Lunita Benamor, old Aboab's granddaughter. What a girl, eh? The belle of Gibraltar! And rich! Her dowry is at least one hundred thousand *duros*."

A Jewess!… She was a Jewess! From that time Aguirre began to meet Luna frequently in the narrow limits of a city where people could hardly move without encountering one another. He saw her on the roof of her house; he came across her on Royal Street as she entered her grandfather's place; he followed her, sometimes in the vicinity of the Puerta del Mar and at others from the extreme end of the town, near the Alameda. She was usually unaccompanied, like all the young ladies of Gibraltar, who are brought up in conformity with English customs. Besides, the town was in a manner a common dwelling in which all knew one another and where woman ran no risk.

Whenever Aguirre met her they would exchange casual glances, but with the expression of persons who have seen each other very often. The consul still experienced the astonishment of a Spaniard influenced by centuries of prejudice. A Jewess!

He would never have believed that the race could produce such a woman. Her outward appearance, correct and elegant as that of an Englishwoman, gave no other indication of her foreign origin than a marked predilection for silk clothes of bright hues, especially strawberry color, and a fondness for sparkling jewelry. With the gorgeousness of an American who pays no attention to hours, she would go out early in the morning with a thick necklace of pearls hanging upon her bosom and two flashing pendants in her ears. A picture hat with costly plumes, imported from London, concealed the ebony beauty of her hair.

Aguirre had acquaintances in Gibraltar, idlers, whom he had met in the cafés, young, obsequious, courteous Israelites who received this Castilian official with ancestral deference, questioning him about affairs of Spain as if that were a remote country.

Whenever passed by them during her constant walks along Royal Street,—taken with no other purpose than to kill time—they spoke of her with respect. "More than a hundred thousand *duros*." Everybody knew the amount of the dowry. And they acquainted the consul with the existence of a certain Israelite who was the girl's affianced husband. He was now in America to complete his fortune. He was rich, but a Jew must labor to add to the legacy of his fathers. The families had arranged the union without even consulting them, when she was twelve years old and he already a man corrupted by frequent changes of residence and traveling adventures. Luna had been waiting already ten years

for the return of her fiancé from Buenos Aires, without the slightest impatience, like the other maidens of her race, certain that everything would take its regular course at the appointed hour.

"These Jewish girls," said a friend of Aguirre, "are never in a hurry. They're accustomed to biding their time. Just see how their fathers have been awaiting the Messiah for thousands of years without growing tired."

One morning, when the Feast of Tabernacles had ended and the Jewish population of the town returned to its normal pursuits, Aguirre entered the establishment of the Aboabs under the pretext of changing a quantity of money into tender of English denomination. It was a rectangular room without any other light than that which came in through the doorway, its walls kalsomined and with a wainscoting of white, glazed tiles. A small counter divided the shop, leaving a space for the public near the entrance and reserving the rest of the place for the owners and a large iron safe. Near the door a wooden charity-box, inscribed in Hebrew, awaited the donations of the faithful for the philanthropic activities of the community. The Jewish customers, in their dealings with the house, deposited there the extra *centimos* of their transactions. Behind the counter were the Aboabs, father and son. The patriarch, Samuel Aboab, was very aged and of a greasy corpulence. As he sat there in his armchair his stomach, hard and soft at the same time, had risen to his chest. His shaven upper lip was somewhat sunken through lack of

teeth; his patriarchal beard, silver white and somewhat yellow at the roots, fell in matted locks, with the majesty of the prophets. Old age imparted to his voice a whimpering quaver, and to his eyes a tearful tenderness. The least emotion brought tears; every word seemed to stir touching recollections. Tears and tears oozed from his eyes, even when he was silent, as if they were fountains whence escaped the grief of an entire people, persecuted and cursed through centuries upon centuries.

His son Zabulon was already old, but a certain black aspect lingered about him, imparting an appearance of virile youth. His eyes were dark, sweet and humble, but with an occasional flash that revealed a fanatic soul, a faith as firm as that of ancient Jerusalem's people, ever ready to stone or crucify the new prophets; his beard, too, was black and firm as that of a Maccabean warrior; black, also, was his curly hair, which looked like an astrakhan cap. Zabulon figured as one of the most active and respected members of the Jewish community,—an individual indispensable to all beneficent works, a loud singer in the synagogue and a great friend of the Rabbi, whom he called "our spiritual chief," an assiduous attendant at all homes where a fellow-religionist lay suffering, ready to accompany with his prayers the gasps of the dying man and afterwards lave the corpse according to custom with a profusion of water that ran in a stream into the street. On Saturdays and special holidays Zabulon would leave his house for the synagogue, soberly arrayed in his frock and his gloves, wearing a silk hat and escorted by three poor co-

religionists who lived upon the crumbs of his business and were for these occasions dressed in a style no less sober and fitting than that of their protector.

"All hands on deck!" the wits of Royal Street would cry. "Make way, for here comes a cruiser with four smokestacks!"

And the four smokestacks of well brushed silk sailed between the groups, bound for the synagogue, looking now to this side and now to that so as to see whether any wicked Hebrew was lounging about the streets instead of attending synagogue; this would afterwards be reported to the "spiritual head."

Aguirre, who was surprised at the poverty of the establishment, which resembled a kitchen, was even more surprised at the facility with which money rolled across the narrow counter. The packets of silver pieces were quickly opened, passing rapidly through the shaggy, expert hands of Zabulon; the pounds fairly sang, as they struck the wood, with the merry ring of gold; the bank-notes, folded like unstitched folios, flashed for a moment before concealing the colors of their nationality in the safe: the simple, monotonous white of the English paper, the soft blue of the Bank of France, the green and red mixture of the Spanish Bank. All the Jews of Gibraltar flocked hither, with that same commercial solidarity which leads them to patronize only establishments owned by members of their race; Zabulon, all by himself, without the aid of clerks, and without allowing his father (the venerable fetich of the family's fortune) to leave his seat, directed this dance of

money, conducting it from the hands of the public to the depths of the iron safe, or fetching it forth to spread it, with a certain sadness, upon the counter. The ridiculous little room seemed to grow in size and acquire beauty at the sound of the sonorous names that issued from the lips of the banker and his customers. London! Paris! Vienna!… The house of Aboab had branches everywhere. Its name and its influence extended not only to the famous world centers, but even to the humblest corners, wherever one of their race existed. Rabat, Casablanca, Larache, Tafilete, Fez, were African towns into which the great banks of Europe could penetrate only with the aid of these auxiliaries, bearing an almost famous name yet living very poorly.

Zabulon, as he changed Aguirre's money, greeted him as if he were a friend. In that city every one knew every body else within twenty-four hours.

Old Aboab pulled himself together in his chair, peering out of his weak eyes with a certain surprise at not being able to recognize this customer among his habitual visitors.

"It's the consul, father," said Zabulon, without raising his glance from the money that he was counting, guessing the reason for the movement of the old man behind him. "The Spanish consul who stops at the hotel opposite our house."

The patriarch seemed to be impressed and raised his hand to his hat with humble courtesy.

"Ah! The consul! The worthy consul!" he exclaimed, emphasizing the title as a token of his great respect for all

the powers of the earth. "Highly honored by your visit, worthy consul."

And believing that he owed his visitor renewed expressions of flattery, he added with tearful sighs, imparting to his words a telegraphic conciseness, "Ah, Spain! Beautiful land, excellent country, nation of gentlemen!… My forefathers came from there, from a place called Espinosa de los Monteros."

His voice quivered, pained by recollections, and afterwards, as if he had in memory advanced to recent times, he added, "Ah! Castelar!… Castelar, a friend of the Jews, and he defended them. Of the *judeos*, as they say there!"

His flood of tears, ill restrained up to that moment, could no longer be held back, and at this grateful recollection it gushed from his eyes, inundating his beard.

"Spain! Beautiful country!" sighed the old man, deeply moved.

And he recalled everything that in the past of his race and his family had united his people with that country. An Aboab had been chief treasurer of the King of Castile; another had been a wonderful physician, enjoying the intimacy of bishops and cardinals. The Jews of Portugal and of Spain had been great personages,—the aristocracy of the race. Scattered now over Morocco and Turkey, they shunned all intercourse with the coarse, wretched Israelite population of Russia and Germany. They still recited certain prayers, in the synagogue, in old Castilian, and the Jews of London repeated them by heart

without knowing either their origin or their meaning, as if they were prayers in a language of sacred mystery. He himself, when he prayed at the synagogue for the King of England, imploring for him an abundance of health and prosperity even as Jews the world over did for the ruler of whatever country they happened to inhabit, added mentally an entreaty to the Lord for the good fortune of beautiful Spain.

Zabulon, despite his respect for his father, interrupted him brusquely, as if he were an imprudent child. In his eyes there glowed the harsh expression of the impassioned zealot.

"Father, remember what they did to us. How they cast us out… how they robbed us. Remember our brothers who were burned alive."

"That's true, that's true," groaned the patriarch, shedding new tears into a broad handkerchief with which he wiped his eyes. "It's true.... But in that beautiful country there still remains something that is ours. The bones of our ancestors."

When Aguirre left, the old man showered him with tokens of extreme courtesy. He and his son were at the consul's service. And the consul returned almost every morning to chat with the patriarch, while Zabulon attended to the customers and counted money.

Samuel Aboab spoke of Spain with tearful delight, as of a marvelous country whose entrance was guarded by terrible monsters with fiery swords. Did they still recall the *judeos* there? And despite Aguirre's assurances, he refused to believe that they

were no longer called thus in Spain. It grieved the old man to die before beholding Espinosa de los Monteros; a beautiful city, without a doubt. Perhaps they still preserved there the memory of the illustrious Aboabs.

The Spaniard smilingly urged him to undertake the journey. Why did he not go there?…

"Go! Go to Spain!…" The old man huddled together like a timorous snail before the idea of this journey.

"There are still laws against the poor *judeos*. The decree of the Catholic Kings. Let them first repeal it!… Let them first call us back!"

Aguirre laughed at his listener's fears. Bah! The Catholic Kings! Much they counted for now!… Who remembered those good gentlemen?

But the old man persisted in his fears. He had suffered much. The terror of the expulsion was still in his bones and in his blood, after four centuries. In summer, when the heat forced them to abandon the torrid rock, and the Aboab family hired a little cottage on the seashore, in Spanish territory just beyond La Línea, the patriarch dwelt in constant restlessness, as if he divined mysterious perils in the very soil upon which he trod. Who could tell what might happen during the night? Who could assure him that he would not awake in chains, ready to be led like a beast to a port? This is what had happened to his Spanish ancestors, who had been forced to take refuge in Morocco, whence a branch of the family had moved to Gibraltar when the

English took possession of the place.

Aguirre poked mild fun at the childish fears of the aged fellow, whereupon Zabulon intervened with his darkly energetic authority.

"My father knows what he is talking about. We will never go; we can't go. In Spain the old customs always return; the old is converted into the new. There is no security; woman has too much power and interferes in matters that she does not understand."

Woman! Zabulon spoke scornfully of the sex. They should be treated as the Jews treated them. The Jews taught them nothing more than the amount of religion necessary to follow the rites. The presence of women in the synagogue was in many instances not obligatory. Even when they came, they were confined to the top of a gallery, like spectators of the lowest rank. No. Religion was man's business, and the countries in which woman has a part in it cannot offer security.

Then the unsympathetic Israelite spoke enthusiastically of the "greatest man in the world," Baron Rothschild, lord over kings and governments—taking care never to omit the title of baron every time he pronounced the name—and he finally named all the great Jewish centers, which were ever increasing in size and population.

"We are everywhere," he asserted, blinking maliciously. "Now we are spreading over America. Governments change, peoples spread over the face of the earth, but we are ever the same. Not

without reason do we await the Messiah. He will come, some day."

On one of his morning visits to the ill appointed bank Aguirre was introduced to Zabulon's two daughters,—Sol and Estrella,—and to his wife, Thamar. On another morning Aguirre experienced a tremor of emotion upon hearing behind him the rustle of silks and noticing that the light from the entrance was obscured by the figure of a person whose identity his nerves had divined. It was Luna, who had come, with all the interest that Hebrew women feel for their domestic affairs, to deliver an order to her uncle. The old man grasped her hands across the counter, caressing them tremblingly.

"This is my granddaughter, sir consul, my granddaughter Luna. Her father is dead, and my daughter too. She comes from Morocco. No one loves the poor girl as much as her grandfather does."

And the patriarch burst into tears, moved by his own words.

Aguirre left the shop with triumphant joy. They had spoken to each other; now they were acquainted. The moment he met her upon the street he would cling to her, taking advantage of some blessed customs that seemed to have been made for lovers.

II

NEITHER could tell how, after several ordinary meetings, their friendly confidence grew, or which had been the first word to reveal the mystery of their thoughts.

They saw each other mornings when Aguirre would go to his window. The Feast of Tabernacles had come to an end, and the Aboabs had taken down the religious structure, but Luna continued to go to the roof under various pretexts, so that she might exchange a glance, a smile, a gesture of greeting with the Spaniard. They did not converse from these heights through fear of the neighbors, but afterwards they met in the street, and Luis, after a respectful salute, would join the young lady, and they would walk along as companions, like other couples they met on their way. All were known to one another in that town. Only by this knowledge could married couples be distinguished from simple friends.

Luna visited various shops on errands for the Aboabs, like a good Jewess who is interested in all the family affairs. At other times she wandered aimlessly through Royal Street, or walked in the direction of the Alameda, explaining the landmarks of the city to Aguirre at her side. In the midst of these walks she would stop at the brokers' shop to greet the patriarch, who smiled childishly as he contemplated the youthful and beautiful couple.

"Señor consul, señor consul," said Samuel one day, "I brought

from my house this morning the family papers, for you to read. Not all of them. There are too many altogether! We Aboabs are very old; I wish to prove to the consul that we are *judeos* of Spain, and that we still remember the beautiful land."

And from underneath the counter he drew forth divers rolls of parchment covered with Hebrew characters. They were matrimonial documents, acts of union of the Aboabs with certain families of the Israelite community. At the head of all these documents figured on one side the coat of arms of England and on the other that of Spain, in bright colors and gold borders.

"We are English," declared the patriarch. "May the Lord preserve our king and send him much happiness; but we are Spaniards historically: Castilians, that is… Castilians."

He selected from the parchments one that was cleaner and fresher than the others, and bent over it his white, wavy beard and his tearful eyes.

"This is the wedding contract of Benamor with my poor daughter: Luna's parents. You can't understand it, for it's in Hebrew characters, but the language is Castilian, pure Castilian, as it was spoken by our ancestors."

And slowly, in an infantile voice, as if he relished the obsolete forms of the words, he read the terms of the contract that united the parties "in the custom of Old Castile." Then he enumerated the conditions of the marriage, the penalties either of the contracting parties might incur if the union were dissolved through his or her fault.

"'Such party will pay,'" mumbled the patriarch, "'will pay… so many silver ounces.' Are there still silver ounces in Castile, señor consul?"…

Luna, in her conversations with Aguirre, demonstrated an interest as keen as that of her old grandfather in the beautiful land, the far-off, remote, mysterious land,—in spite of the fact that its boundary was situated but a few steps away, at the very gates of Gibraltar. All she knew of it was a little fisherman's hamlet, beyond La Línea, whither she had gone with her family on their summer vacations.

"Cadiz! Seville! How enchanting they must be!… I can picture them to myself: I have often beheld them in my dreams, and I really believe that if I ever saw them they wouldn't surprise me in the least.... Seville! Tell me, Don Luis, is it true that sweethearts converse there through a grating? And is it certain that the maidens are serenaded with a guitar, and the young men throw their capes before them as a carpet over which to pass? And isn't it false that men slay one another for them?… How charming! Don't deny all this. It's all so beautiful!…"

Then she would summon to memory all her recollections of that land of miracles, of that country of legends, in which her forebears had dwelt. When she was a child her grandmother, Samuel Aboab's wife, would lull her to sleep reciting to her in a mysterious voice the prodigious events that always had Castile as their background and always began the same: "Once upon a time there was a king of Toledo who fell in love with a beautiful and

charming Jewess named Rachel...."

"Toledo!"… As she uttered this name Luna rolled her eyes as in the vagueness of a dream. The Spanish capital of Israel! The second Jerusalem! Her noble ancestors, the treasurer of the king and the miraculous physician, had dwelt there!

"You must have seen Toledo, Don Luis. You surely have been there. How I envy you!… Very beautiful, isn't it? Vast! Enormous!… Like London?… Like Paris? Of course not.... But certainly far larger than Madrid."

And carried away by the enthusiasm of her illusions she forgot all discretion, questioning Luis about his past. Indubitably he was of the nobility: his very bearing revealed that. From the very first day she had seen him, upon learning his name and his nationality, she had guessed that he was of high origin. A hidalgo such as she had imagined every man from Spain to be, with something Semitic in his face and in his eyes, but more proud, with an air of hauteur that was incapable of supporting humiliations and servility. Perhaps he had a uniform for festive occasions, a suit of bright colors, braided with gold… and a sword, a sword!

Her eyes shone with admiration in the presence of this hidalgo from the land of knights who was dressed as plainly as a shopkeeper of Gibraltar, yet who could transform himself into a glorious insect of brilliant hues, armed with a mortal sting. And Aguirre did not disturb her illusions, answering affirmatively, with all the simplicity of a hero. Yes; he had a golden costume, that of the consul. He possessed a sword, which went with his

uniform, and which had never been unsheathed.

One sunny morning the pair, quite unconsciously, took the path to the Alameda. She made anxious inquiries about Aguirre's past, with indiscreet curiosity, as always happens between persons who feel themselves attracted to each other by a budding affection. Where had he been born? How had he spent his childhood? Had he loved many women?…

They passed beneath the arches of an old gate that dated back to the time of the Spanish possession, and which still preserved the eagles and the shields of the Austrian dynasty. In the old moat, now converted into a garden, there was a group of tombs, —those of the English sailors who had died at Trafalgar. They walked along an avenue in which the trees alternated with heaps of old bombs and cone-shaped projectiles, reddened by rust. Further on, the large cannon craned their necks toward the gray cruisers of the military harbor and the extensive bay, over whose blue plain, tremulous with gold, glided the white dots of some sailing vessels.

On the broad esplanade of the Alameda, at the foot of the mountain covered with pines and cottages, were groups of youths running and kicking a restless ball around. At that hour, as at every hour of the day, the huge ball of the English national game sped through the air over paths, fields and garrison yards. A concert of shouts and kicks, civil as well as military, rose into the air, to the glory of strong and hygienic England.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.