

**Vicente Blasco Ibáñez.**

## **RABIES**

FROM all the countryside the neighbors of the *huerta* flocked to *Caldera's* cabin, entering it with a certain meekness, a mingling of emotion and fear.

How was the boy? Was he improving?... Uncle Pascal, surrounded by his wife, his daughters-in-law and even the most distant relatives, who had been gathered together by misfortune, received with melancholy satisfaction this interest of the entire vicinity in the health of his son. Yes, he was getting better. For two days he had not been attacked by that horrible *thing* which set the cabin in commotion. And *Caldera's* laconic farmer friends, as well as the women, who were vociferous in the expression of their emotions, appeared at the threshold of the room, asking timidly, "How do you feel?"

The only son of *Caldera* was in there, sometimes in bed, in obedience to his mother, who could conceive of no illness without the cup of hot water and seclusion between the bed-sheets; at other times he sat up, his jaws supported by his hands, gazing obstinately into the furthest corner of the room. His father, wrinkling his shaggy white brows, would walk about when left alone, or, through force of habit, take a look at the neighboring fields, but without any desire to bend over and pluck out any of the weeds that were beginning to sprout in the furrows. Much this land mattered to him now,—the earth in whose bowels he had left the sweat of his body and the strength of his limbs!... His son was all he had,—the fruit of a late marriage,—and he was a sturdy youth, as industrious and taciturn as his father; a soldier of the soil, who required neither orders nor threat to fulfil his duties; ready to awake at midnight when it was his turn to irrigate his land and give the fields drink under the light of the stars; quick to spring from his bed on the hard kitchen bench, throwing off the covers and putting on his hemp sandals at the sound of the early rooster's reveille.

Uncle Pascal had never smiled. He was the Latin type of father; the fearful master of the house, who, on returning from his labors, ate alone, served by his wife, who stood by with an expression of submission. But this grave, harsh mask of an omnipotent master concealed a boundless admiration for his son, who was his best work. How quickly he loaded a cart! How he perspired as he managed the hoe with a vigorous forward and backward motion that seemed to cleave him at the waist! Who could ride a pony like him, gracefully jumping on to his back by simply resting the toe of a sandal upon the hind legs of the animal?... He didn't touch wine, never got mixed up in a brawl, nor was he afraid of work. Through good luck he had pulled a high number in the military draft, and when the feast of San Juan came around he intended to marry a girl from a near-by farm,—a maiden that would bring with her a few pieces of earth when she came to the cabin of her new parents. Happiness; an honorable and peaceful continuation of the family traditions; another *Caldera*, who, when Uncle Pascal grew old, would continue to work the lands that had been fructified by his ancestors, while a troop of little *Calderitas*, increasing in

number each year, would play around the nag harnessed to the plow, eyeing with a certain awe their grandpa, his eyes watery from age and his words very concise, as he sat in the sun at the cabin door.

Christ! And how man's illusions vanish!... One Saturday, as Pascualet was coming home from his sweetheart's house, along one of the paths of the *huerta*, about midnight, a dog had bitten him; a wretched, silent animal that jumped out from behind a sluice; as the young man crouched to throw a stone at it, the dog bit into his shoulder. His mother, who used to wait for him on the nights when he went courting, burst into wailing when she saw the livid semicircle, with its red stain left by the dog's teeth, and she bustled about the hut preparing poultices and drinks.

The youth laughed at his mother's fears.

"Quiet, mother, quiet!" It wasn't the first time that a dog had bitten him. His body still showed faint signs of bites that he had received in childhood, when he used to go through the *huerta* throwing stones at the dogs. Old *Caldera* spoke to him from bed, without displaying any emotion. On the following day he was to go to the veterinary and have his flesh cauterized by a burning iron. So he ordered, and there was nothing further to be said about the matter. The young man submitted without flinching to the operation, like a good, brave chap of the Valencian *huerta*. He had four days' rest in all, and even at that, his fondness for work caused him new sufferings and he aided his father with pain-tortured arm. Saturdays, when he came to his sweetheart's farmhouse, she always asked after his health. "How's the bite getting along?" He would shrug his shoulders gleefully before the eyes of the maiden and the two would finally sit down in a corner of the kitchen, remaining in mute contemplation of each other, or speaking of the clothes and the bed for their future home, without daring to come close to each other; there they sat erect and solemn, leaving between their bodies a space "wide enough for a sickle to pass through," as the girl's father smilingly put it.

More than a month passed by. *Caldera's* wife was the only one that did not forget the accident. She followed her son about with anxious glances. Ah, sovereign queen! The *huerta* seemed to have been abandoned by God and His holy mother. Over at Templat's cabin a child was suffering the agonies of hell through having been bitten by a mad dog. All the *huerta* folk were running in terror to have a look at the poor creature; a spectacle that she herself did not dare to gaze upon because she was thinking of her own son. If her Pascualet, as tall and sturdy as a tower, were to meet with the same fate as that unfortunate child!...

One day, at dawn, *Caldera's* son was unable to arise from his kitchen bench, and his mother helped him walk to the large nuptial bed, which occupied a part of the *estudi*, the best room in the cabin. He was feverish, and complained of acute pain in the spot where he had been bitten; an awful chill ran through his whole body, making his teeth chatter and veiling his eyes with a yellowish opacity. Don Jose, the oldest doctor in the *huerta*, came on his ancient mare, with his eternal recipe of purgatives for every class of illness, and bandages soaked in salt water for wounds. Upon examining the sick man he made a

wry face. Bad! Bad! This was a more serious matter; they would have to go to the solemn doctors in Valencia, who knew more than he. *Caldera's* wife saw her husband harness the cart and compel Pascualet to get into it. The boy, relieved of his pain, smiled assent, saying that now he felt nothing more than a slight twinge. When they returned to the cabin the father seemed to be more at ease. A doctor from the city had pricked Pascualet's sore. He was a very serious gentleman, who gave Pascualet courage with his kind words, looking intently at him all the while, and expressing regret that he had waited so long before coming to him. For a week the two men made a daily trip to Valencia, but one morning the boy was unable to move. That crisis which made the poor mother groan with fear had returned with greater intensity than before. The boy's teeth knocked together, and he uttered a wail that stained the corners of his mouth with froth; his eyes seemed to swell, becoming yellow and protruding like huge grape seeds; he tried to pull himself together, writhing from the internal torture, and his mother hung upon his neck, shrieking with terror; meanwhile *Caldera*, grimly silent, seized his son's arms with tranquil strength, struggling to prevent his violent convulsions.

"My son! My son!" cried the mother. Ah, her son! Scarcely could she recognize him as she saw him in this condition. He seemed like another, as if only his former exterior had remained,—as if an infernal monster had lodged within and was martyring this flesh that had come out of her own womb, appearing at his eyes with livid flashes.

Afterwards came calm stupor, and all the women of the district gathered in the kitchen and deliberated upon the lot of the sick youth, cursing the city doctor and his diabolical incisions. It was his fault that the boy now lay thus; before the boy had submitted to the cure he had felt much better. The bandit! And the government never punished these wicked souls!... There were no other remedies than the old, true and tried ones,—the product of the experience of people who had lived years ago and thus knew much more. One of the neighbors went off to hunt up a certain witch, a miraculous doctor for dog-bites, serpent bites and scorpion-stings. Another brought a blind old goatherd, who could cure by the virtue of his mouth, simply by making some crosses of saliva over the ailing flesh. The drinks made of mountain herbs and the moist signs of the goatherd were looked upon as tokens of immediate cure, especially when they beheld the sick youth lie silent and motionless for several hours, looking at the ground with a certain amazement, as if he could feel within him the progress of something strange that grew and grew, gradually overpowering him. Then, when the crisis reoccurred, the doubt of the women began to rise, and new remedies were discussed. The youth's sweetheart came, with her large black eyes moistened by tears, and she advanced timidly until she came near to the sick boy. For the first time she dared to take his hand, blushing beneath her cinammon-colored complexion at this audacious act. "How do you feel?"... And he, so loving in other days, recoiled from her tender touch, turning his eyes away so that he should not see her, as if ashamed of his plight. His mother wept. Queen of heaven! He was very low; he was going to die. If only they could find out what dog it was that had bitten him, and cut out its tongue, using it for a miraculous plaster, as experienced persons advised!...

Throughout the *huerta* it seemed that God's own wrath had burst forth. Some dogs had bitten others; now nobody knew which were the dangerous ones and which the safe. All

mad! The children were secluded in the cabins, spying with terrified glances upon the vast fields, through the half-open doors; mothers journeyed over the winding paths in close groups, uneasy, trembling, hastening their step whenever a bark sounded from behind the sluices of the canals; men eyed the domestic dogs with fear, intently watching their slavering mouths as they gasped or their sad eyes; the agile greyhound, their hunting companion,—the barking cur, guardian of the home,—the ugly mastiff who walked along tied to the cart, which he watched over during the master's, absence,—all were placed under their owners' observation or coldly sacrificed behind the walls of the corral, without any display of emotion whatever.

"Here they come! Here they come!" was the shout passed along from cabin to cabin, announcing the patter of a pack of dogs, howling, ravenous, their bodies covered with mud, running about without finding rest, driven on day and night, with the madness of persecution in their eyes. The *huerta* seemed to shudder, closing the doors of all the houses and suddenly bristling with guns. Shots rang out from the sluices, from the high corn-fields, from cabin windows, and when the wanderers, repelled and persecuted on every side, in their mad gallop dashed toward the sea, as if they were attracted by the moist, invigorating air that was washed by the waves, the revenue-guards camped on the wide strip of beach brought their mausers to their cheek and received them with a volley. The dogs retreated, escaping among the men who were approaching them musket in hand, and one or another of them would be stretched out at the edge of a canal. At night, the noisy gloom of the plain was broken by the sight of distant flashes and the sound of discharges. Every shape that moved in the darkness was the target for a bullet; the muffled howls that sounded in the vicinity of the cabins were answered by shots. The men were afraid of this common terror, and avoided meeting.

No sooner did night fall than the *huerta* was left without a light, without a person upon the roads, as if death had taken possession of the dismal plain, so green and smiling under the sun. A single red spot, a tear of light, trembled in this obscurity. It was *Caldera's* cabin, where the women, squatting upon the floor, around the kitchen lamp, sighed with fright, anticipating the strident shriek of the sick youth,—the chattering of his teeth, the violent contortions of his body whenever he was seized with convulsions, struggling to repel the arms that tried to quiet him.

The mother hung upon the neck of that raving patient who struck terror to men. She scarcely knew him; he was somebody else, with those eyes that popped out of their sockets, his livid or blackish countenance, his writhings, like that of a tortured animal, showing his tongue as he gasped through bubbles of froth in the agonies of an insatiable thirst. He begged for death in heart-rending shrieks; he struck his head against the wall; he tried to bite; but even so, he was her child and she did not feel the fear experienced by the others. His menacing mouth withdrew before the wan face that was moistened with tears. "Mother! Mother!" He recognized her in his lucid moments. She need not fear him; he would never bite her. And as if he must sink his teeth into something or other to glut his rage, he bit into his arms until the blood came.

"My son! My son!" moaned the mother and she wiped the deadly froth from his lips, afterwards carrying the handkerchief to her eyes, without fear of contagion. *Caldera*, in his solemn gravity, paid no heed to the sufferer's threatening eyes, which were fixed upon him with an impulse of attack. The boy had lost his awe of his father.

That powerful man, however, facing the peril of his son's mouth, thrust him back into bed whenever the madman tried to flee, as if he must spread everywhere the horrible affliction that was devouring his entrails.

No longer were the crises followed by extended intervals of calm. They became almost continuous, and the victim writhed about, clawed and bleeding from his own bites, his face almost black, his eyes tremulous and yellow, looking like some monstrous beast set apart from all the human species. The old doctor had stopped asking about the youth. What was the use? It was all over. The women wept hopelessly. Death was certain. They only bewailed the long hours, perhaps days, of horrible torture that poor Pascualet would have to undergo.

*Caldera* was unable to find among his relatives or friends any men brave enough to help him restrain the sufferer in his violent moments. They all looked with terror at the door to the *estudi*, as if behind it were concealed the greatest of dangers. To go shooting through roads and canals was man's work. A stab could be returned; one bullet could answer another; but ah! that frothing mouth which killed with a bite!... that incurable disease which made men writhe in endless agony, like a lizard sliced by a hoe!

He no longer knew his mother. In his final moments of lucidity he had thrust her away with loving brusqueness. She must go!... Let him not see her again!... He feared to do her harm! The poor woman's friends dragged her out of the room, forcing her to remain motionless, like her son, in a corner of the kitchen. *Caldera*, with a supreme effort of his dying will, tied the agonizing youth to the bed. His beetling brows trembled and the tears made him blink as he tied the coarse knots of the rope, fastening the youth to the bed upon which he had been born. He felt as if he were preparing his son for burial and had begun to dig his grave. The victim twisted in wild contortions under the father's strong arms; the parent had to make a powerful effort to subdue him under the rope that sank into his flesh.... To have lived so many years only to behold himself at last obliged to perform such a task! To give life to a creature, only to pray that it might be extinguished as soon as possible, horrified by so much useless pain!... Good God in heaven! Why not put an end to the poor boy at once, since his death was now inevitable?...

He closed the door of the sick room, fleeing from the rasping shriek that set everybody's hair on end; but the madman's panting continued to sound in the silence of the cabin, accompanied by the lamentations of the mother and the weeping of the other women grouped around the lamp, that had just been lighted.

*Caldera* stamped upon the floor. Let the women be silent! But for the first time he beheld himself disobeyed, and he left the cabin, fleeing from this chorus of grief.

Night descended. His gaze wandered toward the thin yellow band that was visible on the horizon, marking the flight of day. Above his head shone the stars. From the other homes, which were scarcely visible, resounded the neighing of horses, barking and the clucking of fowl,—the last signs of animal life before it sank to rest. That primitive man felt an impression of emptiness amid the Nature which was insensible and blind to the sufferings of its creatures. Of what concern to the points of light that looked down upon him from above could be that which he was now going through?... All creatures were equal; the beasts that disturbed the silence of dusk before falling asleep, and that poor youth similar to him, who now lay fettered, writhing in the worst of agony. How many illusions his life had contained!... And with a mere bite, a wretched animal kicked about by all men could finish them all. And no remedy existed in heaven or upon earth!...

Once again the distant shriek of the sufferer came to his ears from the open window of the *estudi*. The tenderness of his early days of paternity emerged from the depths of his soul. He recalled the nights he had spent awake in that room, walking up and down, holding in his arms the little child that was crying from the pains of infancy's illness. Now he lay crying, too, but without hope, in the agonies of a hell that had come before its time, and at last... death. His countenance grew frightened, and he raised his hands to his forehead as if trying to drive away a troublesome thought. Then he appeared to deliberate.... Why not?...

"To end his suffering... to end his suffering!"

He went back to the cabin, only to come out at once with his old double-barrelled musket, and he hastened to the little window of the sick room as if he feared to lose his determination; he thrust the gun through the opening.

Again he heard the agonizing panting, the chattering of teeth, the horrible shriek, now very near, as if he were at the victim's bedside. His eyes, accustomed to the darkness saw the bed at the back of the gloomy room, and the form that lay writhing in it,—the pale spot of the face, appearing and disappearing as the sick man twisted about desperately.

The father was frightened at the trembling of his hands and the agitation of his pulse; he, the son of the *huerta*, without any other diversion than the hunt, accustomed to shoot down birds almost without aiming at them.

The wailing of the poor mother brought back to his memory other groans of long long ago,—twenty-two years before—when she was giving birth to her only son upon that same bed.

To come to such an end!... His eyes, gazing heavenward, saw a black sky, intensely black, with not a star in sight, and obscured by his tears....

"Lord! To end his sufferings! To end his sufferings!"

And repeating these words he pressed the musket against his shoulder, seeking the lock with a tremulous finger.... Bang! Bang!

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