

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez.

THE LAST LION

SCARCELY had the meeting of the honorable guild of *blanquers* come to order within its chapel near the towers of Serranos, when Señor Vicente asked for the floor. He was the oldest tanner in Valencia. Many masters recalled their apprentice days and declared that he was the same now as then, with his white, brush-like mustache, his face that looked like a sun of wrinkles, his aggressive eyes and cadaverous thinness, as if all the sap of his life had been consumed in the daily motions of his feet and hands about the vats of the tannery.

He was the only representative of the guild's glories, the sole survivor of those *blanquers* who were an honor to Valencian history. The grandchildren of his former companions had become corrupted with the march of time; they were proprietors of large establishments, with thousands of workmen, but they would be lost if they ever had to tan a skin with their soft, business-man's hands. Only he could call himself a *blanquer* of the old school, working every day in his little hut near the guild house; master and toiler at the same time, with no other assistants than his sons and grandchildren; his workshop was of the old kind, amid sweet domestic surroundings, with neither threats of strikes nor quarrels over the day's pay.

The centuries had raised the level of the street, converting Señor Vicente's shop into a gloomy cave. The door through which his ancestors had entered had grown smaller and smaller from the bottom until it had become little more than a window. Five stairs connected the street with the damp floor of the tannery, and above, near a pointed arch, a relic of medieval Valencia, floated like banners the skins that had been hung up to dry, wafting about the unbearable odor of the leather. The old man by no means envied the *moderns*, in their luxuriously appointed business offices. Surely they blushed with shame on passing through his lane and seeing him, at breakfast hour, taking the sun,—his sleeves and trousers rolled up, showing his thin arms and legs, stained red,—with the pride of a robust old age that permitted him to battle daily with the hides.

Valencia was preparing to celebrate the centenary of one of its famous saints, and the guild of *blanquers*, like the other historic guilds, wished to make its contribution to the festivities. Señor Vicente, with the prestige of his years, imposed his will upon all the masters. The *blanquers* should remain what they were. All the glories of their past, long sequestered in the chapel, must figure in the procession. And it was high time they were displayed in public! His gaze, wandering about the chapel, seemed to caress the guild's relics; the sixteenth century drums, as large as jars, that preserved within their drumheads the hoarse cries of revolutionary Germania; the great lantern of carved wood, torn from the prow of a galley; the red silk banner of the guild, edged with gold that had become greenish through the ages.

All this must be displayed during the celebration, shaking off the dust of oblivion; even the famous lion of the *blanquers*!

The *moderns* burst into impious laughter. The lion, too?... Yes, the lion, too. To Señor Vicente it seemed a dishonor on the part of the guild to forget that glorious beast. The ancient ballads, the accounts of celebrations that might be read in the city archives, the old folks who had lived in the splendid epoch of the guilds with their fraternal camaraderie,—all spoke of the *blanquers'* lion; but now nobody knew the animal, and this was a shame for the trade, a loss to the city.

Their lion was as great a glory as the silk mart or the well of San Vicente. He knew very well the reason for this opposition on the part of the *moderns*. They feared to assume the rôle of the lion. Never fear, my young fellows! He, with his burden of years, that numbered more than seventy, would claim this honor. It belonged to him in all justice; his father, his grandfather, his countless ancestors, had all been lions, and he felt equal to coming to blows with anybody who would dare dispute his right to the rôle of the lion, traditional in his family.

With what enthusiasm Señor Vicente related the history of the lion and the heroic *blanquers*! One day the Barbary pirates from Bujia had landed at Torreblanca, just beyond Castellón, and sacked the church, carrying off the Shrine. This happened a little before the time of Saint Vicente Ferrer, for the old tanner had no other way of explaining history than by dividing it into two periods; before and after the Saint... The population, which was scarcely moved by the raids of the pirates, hearing of the abduction of pale maidens with large black eyes and plump figures, destined for the harem, as if this were an inevitable misfortune, broke into cries of grief upon learning of the sacrilege at Torreblanca.

The churches of the town were draped in black; people went through the streets wailing loudly, striking themselves as a punishment. What could those dogs do with the blessed Host? What would become of the poor, defenseless Shrine?... Then it was that the valiant *blanquers* came upon the scene. Was not the Shrine at Bujia? Then on to Bujia in quest of it! They reasoned like heroes accustomed to beating hides all day long, and they saw nothing formidable about beating the enemies of God. At their own expense they fitted out a galley and the whole guild went aboard, carrying along their beautiful banner; the other guilds, and indeed the entire town, followed this example and chartered other vessels.

The Justice himself cast aside his scarlet gown and covered himself with mail from head to foot; the worthy councilmen abandoned the benches of the Golden Chamber, shielding their paunches with scales that shone like those of the fishes in the gulf; the hundred archers of la Pluma, who guarded *la Señera* filled their quivers with arrows, and the Jews from the quarter of la Xedrea did a rushing business, selling all their old iron, including lances, notched swords and rusty corselets, in exchange for good, ringing pieces of silver.

And off sped the Valencian galleys, with their jib-sails spread to the wind, convoyed by a shoal of dolphins, which sported about in the foam of their prows!... When the Moors beheld them approaching, the infidels began to tremble, repenting of their irreverence toward the Shrine. And this, despite the fact that they were a set of hardened old dogs. Valencians, headed by the valiant *blanquers*! Who, indeed, would dare face them!

The battle raged for several days and nights, according to the tale of Señor Vicente. Reinforcements of Moors arrived, but the Valencians, loyal and fierce, fought to the death. And they were already beginning to feel exhausted from the labor of disembowelling so many infidels, when behold, from a neighboring mountain a lion comes walking down on his hind paws, for all the world like a regular person, carrying in his forepaws, most reverently, the Shrine,—the Shrine that had been stolen from Torreblanca! The beast delivered it ceremoniously into the hands of one of the guild, undoubtedly an ancestor of Señor Vicente, and hence for centuries his family had possessed the privilege of representing that amiable animal in the Valencian processions.

Then he shook his mane, emitted a roar, and with blows and bites in every direction cleared the field instantly of Moors.

The Valencians sailed for home, carrying the Shrine back like a trophy. The chief of the *blanquers* saluted the lion, courteously offering him the guild house, near the towers of Serranos, which he could consider as his own. Many thanks; the beast was accustomed to the sun of Africa and feared a change of climate.

But the trade was not ungrateful, and to perpetuate the happy recollection of the shaggy-maned friend whom they possessed on the other shore of the sea, every time the guild banner floated in the Valencian celebrations, there marched behind it an ancestor of Señor Vicente, to the sound of drums, and he was covered with hide, with a mask that was the living image of the worthy lion, bearing in his hands a Shrine of wood, so small and poor that it caused one to doubt the genuine value of Torreblanca's own Shrine.

Perverse and irreverent persons even dared to affirm, to the great indignation of Señor Vicente, that the whole story was a lie. Sheer envy! Ill will of the other trades, which couldn't point to such a glorious history! There was the guild chapel as proof, and in it the lantern from the prow of the vessel, which the conscienceless wretches declared dated from many centuries after the supposed battle; and there were the guild drums, and the glorious banner; and the moth-eaten hide of the lion, in which all his predecessors had encased themselves, lay now forgotten behind the altar, covered with cobwebs and dust, but it was none the less as authentic and worthy of reverence as the stones of el Miguelete.[\[1\]](#)

And above all there was his faith, ardent and incontrovertible, capable of receiving as an affront to the family the slightest irreverence toward the African lion, the illustrious friend of the guild.

The procession took place on an afternoon in June. The sons, the daughters-in-law and the grandsons of Señor Vicente helped him to get into the costume of the lion, perspiring most uncomfortably at the mere touch of that red-stained wool. "Father, you're going to roast."—"Grandpa, you'll melt inside of this costume."

The old man, however, deaf to the warnings of the family, shook his moth-eaten mane with pride, thinking of his ancestors; then he tried on the terrifying mask, a cardboard arrangement that imitated, with a faint resemblance, the countenance of the wild beast.

What a triumphant afternoon! The streets crowded with spectators; the balconies decorated with bunting, and upon them rows of variegated bonnets shading fair faces from the sun; the ground covered with myrtle, forming a green, odorous carpet whose perfume seemed to expand the lungs.

The procession was headed by the standard-bearers, with beards of hemp, crowns and striped dalmatics, holding aloft the Valencian banners adorned with enormous bats and large L's beside the coat of arms; then, to the sound of the flageolet, the retinue of brave Indians, shepherds from Belen, Catalans and Mallorcans; following these passed the dwarfs with their monstrously huge heads, clicking the castanets to the rhythm of a Moorish march; behind these came the giants of the Corpus and at the end, the banners of the guilds; an endless row of red standards, faded with the years, and so tall that their tops reached higher than the first stories of the buildings.

Flom! Rotoplom! rolled the drums of the *blanquers*,—instruments of barbarous sonority, so large that their weight forced the drummers to bow their necks. Flom! Rotoplom! they resounded, hoarse and menacing, with savage solemnity, as if they were still marking the tread of the revolutionary German regiments, sallying forth to the encounter with the emperor's young leader,—that Don Juan of Aragón, duke of Segorbe, who served Victor Hugo as the model for his romantic personage *Hernani*! Flom! Rotoplom! The people ran for good places and jostled one another to obtain a better view of the guild members, bursting into laughter and shouts. What was that? A monkey?... A wild man?... Ah! The faith of the past was truly laughable.

The young members of the trade, their shirts open at the neck and their sleeves rolled up, took turns at carrying the heavy banner, performing feats of jugglery, balancing it on the palms of their hands or upon their teeth, to the rhythm of the drums.

The wealthy masters had the honor of holding the cords of the banner, and behind them marched the lion, the glorious lion of the guild, who was now no longer known. Nor did the lion march in careless fashion; he was dignified, as the old traditions bade him be, and as Señor Vicente had seen his father march, and as the latter had seen his grandfather; he kept time with the drums, bowing at every step, to right and to left, moving the Shrine fan-wise, like a polite and well-bred beast who knows the respect due to the public.

The farmers who had come to the celebration opened their eyes in amazement; the mothers pointed him out with their fingers so that the children might see him; but the

youngsters, frowning, tightened their grasp upon their mothers' necks, hiding their faces to shed tears of terror.

When the banner halted, the glorious lion had to defend himself with his hind paws against the disrespectful swarm of gamins that surrounded him, trying to tear some locks out of his moth-eaten mane. At other times the beast looked up at the balconies to salute the pretty girls with the Shrine; they laughed at the grotesque figure. And Señor Vicente did wisely; however much of a lion one may be, one must be gallant toward the fair sex.

The spectators fanned themselves, trying to find a momentary coolness in the burning atmosphere; the *horchateros*^[2] bustled among the crowds shouting their wares, called from all directions at once and not knowing whither to go first; the standard-bearers and the drummers wiped the sweat off their faces at every restaurant door, and at last went inside to seek refreshment.

But the lion stuck to his post. His mask became soft; he walked with a certain weariness, letting the Shrine rest upon his stomach, having by this time lost all desire to bow to the public.

Fellow tanners approached him with jesting questions.

"How are things going, *so Visent*?"

And *so Visent* roared indignantly from the interior of his cardboard disguise. How should things go? Very well. He was able to keep it up, without failing in his part, even if the parade continued for three days. As for getting tired, leave that to the young folks. And drawing himself proudly erect, he resumed his bows, marking time with his swaying Shrine of wood.

The procession lasted three hours. When the guild banner returned to the Cathedral night was beginning to fall.

Plom! Retoplom! The glorious banner of the *blanquers* returned to its guild house behind the drums. The myrtle on the streets had disappeared beneath the feet of the paraders. Now the ground was covered with drops of wax, rose leaves and strips of tinsel. The liturgic perfume of incense floated through the air. Plom! Retoplom! The drums were tired; the strapping youths who had carried the standards were now panting, having lost all desire to perform balancing tricks; the rich masters clutched the cords of the banner tightly, as if the latter were towing them along, and they complained of their new shoes and their bunions; but the lion, the weary lion (ah, swaggering beast!), who at times seemed on the point of falling to the ground, still had strength left to rise on his hind paws and frighten the suburban couples, who pulled at a string of children that had been dazzled by the sights.

A lie! Pure conceit! Señor Vicente knew what it felt like to be inside of the lion's hide. But nobody is obliged to take the part of the lion, and he who assumes it must stick it out to the bitter end.

Once home, he sank upon the sofa like a bundle of wool; his sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren hastened to remove the mask from his face. They could scarcely recognize him, so congested and scarlet were his features, which seemed to spurt water from every line of his wrinkles.

They tried to remove his skins; but the beast was oppressed by a different desire, begging in a suffocated voice. He wished a drink; he was choking with the heat. The family, warning against illness, protested in vain. The deuce! He desired a drink right away. And who would dare resist an infuriated lion?...

From the nearest café they brought him some ice-cream in a blue cup; a Valencian ice cream, honey-sweet and grateful to the nostrils, glistening with drops of white juice at the conical top.

But what are ice creams to a lion! *Haaam!* He swallowed it at a single gulp, as if it were a mere trifle! His thirst and the heat assailed him anew, and he roared for other refreshment.

The family, for reasons of economy, thought of the *horchata* from a near-by restaurant. They would see; let a full jar of it be brought. And Señor Vicente drank and drank until it was unnecessary to remove the skins from him. Why? Because an attack of double pneumonia finished him inside of a few hours. The glorious, shaggy-haired *uniform* of the family served him as a shroud.

Thus died the lion of the *blanquers*,—the last lion of Valencia.

And the fact is that *horchata* is fatal for beasts.... Pure poison!

END