

The Moretas were spending St. John's Day with the children's grandfather, whose feast it was. Doña Lupeng awoke feeling faint with the heat, a sound of screaming in her ears. In the dining room the three boys, already attired in their holiday suits, were at breakfast, and came crowding around her, all talking at once.

"How long you have slept, Mama!"

"We thought you were never getting up!"

"Do we leave at once, huh? Are we going now?"

"Hush, hush, I implore you! Now look: your father has a headache, and so have I. So be quiet this instant—or no one goes to Grandfather."

Though it was only seven by the clock the house was already a furnace, the windows dilating with the harsh light and the air already burning with the immense, intense fever of noon. She found the children's nurse working in the kitchen. "And why is it you who are preparing breakfast? Where is Amada?" But without waiting for an answer she went to the backdoor and opened it, and the screaming in her ears became a wild screaming in the stables across the yard. "Oh, my God!" she groaned and, grasping her skirts, hurried across the yard. In the stables Entoy, the driver, apparently deaf to the screams, was hitching the pair of piebald ponies to the coach.

"Not the closed coach, Entoy! The open carriage!" shouted Doña

Lupeng as she came up.

"But the dust, señora—"

"I know, but better to be dirty than to be boiled alive. And what ails your wife, eh? Have you been beating her again?"

"Oh no, señora: I have not touched her."

"Then why is she screaming? Is she ill?"

"I do not think so. But how do I know? You can go and see for yourself, señora. She is up there."

When Doña Lupeng entered the room, the big half-naked woman sprawled across the bamboo bed stopped screaming. Doña Lupeng was shocked.

“What is this, Amanda? Why are you still in bed at this hour? And in such posture! Come, get up at once. You should be ashamed!”

But the woman on the bed merely stared. Her sweat-beaded brows contracted, as if in an effort to understand. Then her face relaxed, her mouth sagged open humorously and, rolling over on her back and spreading out her big soft arms and legs, she began noiselessly quaking with laughter—the mute mirth jerking in her throat; the moist pile of her flesh quivering like brown jelly. Saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth. Doña Lupeng blushed, looking around helplessly; and seeing that Entoy had followed and was leaning in the doorway, watching stolidly, she blushed again. The room reeked hotly of intimate odors. She averted her eyes from the laughing woman on the bed, in whose nakedness she seemed so to participate that she was ashamed to look directly at the man in the doorway.

“Tell me, Entoy: has she been to the Tadtarin?”

“Yes, senora. Last night.”

“But I forbade her to go! And I forbade you to let her go!”

“I could do nothing.”

“Why, you beat her at the least pretext!”

“But now I dare not touch her.”

“Oh, and why not?”

“It is the day of St. John: the spirit is in her.”

“But man—”

“It is true, senora. The spirit in her.”

“But, man—”

“It is true, señora. The spirit is in her. She is the Tadtarin. She must do as she pleases. Otherwise, the grain would not grow, the trees would bear no fruit, the rivers would give no fish, and the animals would die.”

“Naku, I did not know your wife was so powerful, Entoy.”

“At such times she is not my wife: She is the wife of the river, she is the wife of the crocodile, and she is the wife of the moon.”

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“But how can they still believe such things?” demanded Doña Lupeng of her husband as they drove in the open carriage through the pastoral countryside that was the arrabal of Paco in the 1850’s.

Don Paeng, drowsily stroking his mustaches, his eyes closed against the hot light, merely shrugged.

“And you should have seen that Entoy,” continued his wife. “You know how the brute treats her: she cannot say a word but he thrashes her. But this morning he stood as meek as lamb while she screamed and screamed. He seemed actually in awe of her, do you know—actually afraid of her!”

Don Paeng darted a sidelong glance at his wife, by which he intimated that he subject was not a proper one for the children, who were sitting opposite, facing their parents.

“Oh, look, boys—here comes the St. John!” cried Doña Lupeng, and she sprang up in the swaying carriage, propping one hand on her husband’s shoulder while with the other she held up her silk parasol.

And “Here come the men with their St. John!” cried voices up and down the countryside. People in wet clothes dripping with well-water, ditch-water and river-water came running across the hot woods and fields and meadows, brandishing cans of water, wetting each other uproariously, and shouting ‘San Juan! San Juan!’ as they ran to meet the procession. Up the road, stirring a cloud of dust, and gaily bedrenched by the crowds gathered along the wayside, a concourse of young men clad only in soggy trousers were carrying aloft an image of the Precursor. Their teeth flashed white in their laughing faces and their hot bodies glowed crimson as they pranced past, shrouded in fiery dust, singing, and shouting and waving their arms: the St. John riding swiftly above the sea of dark heads and glittering in the noon sun—a fine, blonde, heroic St. John: very male, very arrogant: the Lord of Summer indeed; the Lord of Light and Heat—erect and goldly virile above the prone and female earth—while the worshippers danced and the dust thickened and the animals reared and roared and the merciless fires came raining down from the skies—the vast outpouring of light that marks this climax of the solar year?raining relentlessly upon field and river and town and winding road, and upon the joyous throng of young men against whose uproar a couple of seminarians in muddy cassocks vainly intoned the hymn of the noon god: That worthy servants, in chorus May praise thee, our tongues restore us...

But Doña Lupeng, standing in the stopped carriage, looking very young and elegant in her white frock, under the twirling parasol, stared down on the passing male horde with increasing annoyance. The insolent man-smell of their bodies rose all about her?wave upon wave of it?enveloping her, assaulting her senses, till she felt faint with it and pressed a handkerchief to her nose. And as she glanced at her husband and saw with what a smug smile, he was watching the revelers, her

annoyance deepened. When he bade her sit down because all eyes were turned on her, she pretended not to hear; stood up even straighter, as if to defy those rude creatures flaunting their manhood in the sun.

And she wondered peevishly what the braggarts were being so cocky about? For this arrogance, this pride, this bluff male health of theirs was (she told herself) founded on the impregnable virtue of generations of good women. The boobies were so sure of themselves because they had always been sure of their wives. "All the sisters being virtuous, all the brothers are brave," thought Doña Lupeng, with a bitterness that rather surprised her. Women had built it up: this poise of the male. Ah, and women could destroy it, too! She recalled, vindictively, this morning's scene at the stables: Amada naked and screaming in bed while from the doorway her lord and master looked on in meek silence. And was it not the mystery of a woman in her flowers that had restored the tongue of that old Hebrew prophet?

"Look, Lupeng, they have all passed now," Don Paeng was saying. "Do you mean to stand all the way?" She looked around in surprise and hastily sat down. The children tittered, and the carriage started.

"Has the heat gone to your head, woman?" asked Don Paeng, smiling. The children burst frankly into laughter.

Their mother colored and hung her head. She was beginning to feel ashamed of the thoughts that had filled her mind. They seemed improper—almost obscene—and the discovery of such depths of wickedness in herself appalled her. She moved closer to her husband, to share the parasol with him.

"And did you see our cousin Guido?" he asked.

"Oh, was he in that crowd?"

"A European education does not seem to have spoiled his taste for country pleasures."

"I did not see him."

"He waved and waved."

"The poor boy. He will feel hurt. But truly, Paeng, I did not see him."

"Well, that is always a woman's privilege."

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But when that afternoon, at the grandfather's, the young Guido presented himself, properly attired and brushed and scented, Doña Lupeng was so charming and gracious with him that he was enchanted and gazed after her all afternoon with enamored eyes.

This was the time when our young men were all going to Europe and bringing back with them, not the Age of Victoria, but the Age of Byron. The young Guido knew nothing of Darwin and evolution; he knew everything about Napoleon and the Revolution. When Doña Lupeng expressed surprise at his presence that morning in the St. John's crowd, he laughed in her face.

"But I adore these old fiestas of ours! They are so romantic! Last night, do you know, we walked all the way through the woods, I and some boys to see the procession of the Tadtarin."

"And was the romantic too?" asked Doña Lupeng.

It was weird. It made my flesh crawl. All those women in such a mystic frenzy! And she who was the Tadtarin last night—she was a figure right out of a flamenco!"

I fear to disenchant you, Guido—but that woman happens to be our cook."

"She is beautiful."

"Our Amada is beautiful? But she is old and fat!"

"She is beautiful—as that old tree you are leaning on is beautiful," calmly insisted the young man, mocking her with his eyes.

They were out in the buzzing orchard, among the ripe mangoes; Doña Lupeng seated on the grass, her legs tucked beneath her, and the young man sprawled flat on his belly, gazing up at her, his face moist with sweat. The children were chasing dragonflies. The sun stood still in the west. The long day refused to end. From the house came the sudden roaring laughter of the men playing cards.

"Beautiful! Romantic! Adorable! Are those the only words you learned in Europe?" cried Doña Lupeng, feeling very annoyed with this young man whose eyes adored her one moment and mocked her at the next.

"Ah, I also learned to open my eyes over there—to see the holiness and the mystery of what is vulgar."

"And what is so holy and mysterious about—about the Tadtarin, for instance?"

"I do not know. I can only feel it. And it frightens me. Those rituals come to us from the earliest dawn of the world. And the dominant figure is not the male but the female."

"But they are in honor of St. John."

"What has your St. John to do with them? Those women worship a more ancient lord. Why, do you know that no man may join in those rites unless he first puts on some article of women's apparel and—"

"And what did you put on, Guido?"

"How sharp you are! Oh, I made such love to a toothless old hag there that she pulled off her stocking for me. And I pulled it on, over my arm, like a glove. How your husband would have despised me!"

"But what on earth does it mean?"

"I think it is to remind us men that once upon a time you woman were supreme and we men were the slaves."

"But surely there have always been kings?"

"Oh, no. The queen came before the king, and the priestess before the priest, and the moon before the sun."

"The moon?"

"—who is the Lord of the women."

"Why?"

"Because the tides of women, like the tides of the sea, are tides of the moon. Because the first blood— But what is the matter, Lupe? Oh, have I offended you?"

"Is this how they talk to decent women in Europe?"

"They do not talk to women; they pray to them—as men did in the dawn of the world."

"Oh, you are mad! Mad!"

"Why are you so afraid, Lupe?"

"I, afraid? And of whom? My dear boy, you still have your mother's milk in your mouth. I only wish you to remember that I am a married woman."

"I remember that you are a woman, yes. A beautiful woman. And why not? Did you turn into some dreadful monster when you married? Did you stop being a woman? Did you stop, being beautiful? Then why should my eyes not tell you what you are—just because you are married?"

"Ah, this is too much now!" cried Doña Lupeng, and she rose to her feet.

"Do not go, I implore you! Have pity on me!"

"No more of your comedy, Guido! And besides—where have those children gone to! I must go after them."

As she lifted her skirts to walk away, the young man, propping up his elbows, dragged himself forward on the ground and solemnly kissed the tips of her shoes. She stared down in sudden horror, transfixed—and he felt her violent shudder. She backed away slowly, still staring; then turned and fled toward the house.

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On the way home that evening Don Paeng noticed that his wife was in a mood. They were alone in the carriage: the children were staying overnight at their grandfather's. The heat had not subsided. It was heat without gradations: that knew no twilights and no dawns; that was still there, after the sun had set; that would be there already, before the sun had risen.

"Has young Guido been annoying you?" asked Don Paeng.

"Yes! All afternoon."

"These young men today—what a disgrace they are! I felt embarrassed as a man to see him following you about with those eyes of a whipped dog."

She glanced at him coldly. "And was that all you felt, Paeng? Embarrassed—as a man?"

"A good husband has constant confidence in the good sense of his wife," he pronounced grandly, and smiled at her.

But she drew away; huddled herself in the other corner. "He kissed my feet," she told him disdainfully, her eyes on his face.

He frowned and made a gesture of distaste. "Do you see? They have the instincts, the style of the canalla! To kiss a woman's feet, to follow her like a dog, to adore her like a slave—"

"Is it so shameful for a man to adore women?"

“A gentleman loves and respects Woman. The cads and lunatics—they ‘adore’ the women.”

“But maybe we do not want to be loved and respected—but to be adored.”

“Ah, he has converted you then?”

“Who knows? But must we talk about it? My head is bursting with the heat.”

But when they reached home, she did not lie down but wandered listlessly through the empty house. When Don Paeng, having bathed and changed, came down from the bedroom, he found her in the dark parlour seated at the harp and plucking out a tune, still in her white frock and shoes.

“How can you bear those hot clothes, Lupeng? And why the darkness? Order someone to bring a light in here.”

“There is no one, they have all gone to see the Tadtarin.”

“A pack of loafers we are feeding!”

She had risen and gone to the window. He approached and stood behind her, grasped her elbows and, stooping, kissed the nape of her neck. But she stood still, not responding, and he released her sulkily. She turned around to face him.

“Listen, Paeng. I want to see it, too. The Tadtarin, I mean. I have not seen it since I was a little girl. And tonight, is the last night.”

“You must be crazy! Only low people go there. And I thought you had a headache?” He was still sulking.

“But I want to go! My head aches worse in the house. For a favour, Paeng.”

“I told you: No! Go and take those clothes off. But, woman, whatever has got into you!” He strode off to the table, opened the box of cigars, took one, banged the lid shut, bit off an end of the cigar, and glared about for a light.

She was still standing by the window and her chin was up.

“Very well, if you do not want to come, do not come—but I am going.”

“I warn you, Lupe; do not provoke me!”

“I will go with Amada. Entoy can take us. You cannot forbid me, Paeng. There is nothing wrong with it. I am not a child.”

But standing very straight in her white frock, her eyes shining in the dark and her chin thrust up, she looked so young, so fragile, that his heart was touched. He sighed, smiled ruefully, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, the heat has touched you in the head, Lupeng. And since you are so set on it—very well, let us go. Come, have the coach ordered!” The cult of the Tadtarin is celebrated on three days: the feast of St. John and the two preceding days. On the first night, a young girl heads the procession; on the second, a mature woman; and on the third, a very old woman who dies and comes to life again. In these processions, as in those of Pakil and Obando, everyone dances.

Around the tiny plaza in front of the barrio chapel, quite a stream of carriages was flowing leisurely. The Moretas were constantly being hailed from the other vehicles. The plaza itself and the sidewalk were filled with chattering, strolling, profusely sweating people. More people were crowded on the balconies and windows of the houses. The moon had not yet risen; the black night smoldered; in the windless sky the lightning’s abruptly branching fire seemed the nerves of the tortured air made visible.

“Here they come now!” cried the people on the balconies.

And “Here come the women with their St. John!” cried the people on the sidewalks, surging forth on the street. The carriages halted and their occupants descended. The plaza rang with the shouts of people and the neighing of horses—and with another keener sound: a sound as of sea-waves steadily rolling nearer.

The crowd parted, and up the street came the prancing, screaming, writhing women, their eyes wild, black shawls flying around their shoulders, and their long hair streaming and covered with leaves and flowers. But the Tadtarin, a small old woman with white hair, walked with calm dignity in the midst of the female tumult, a wand in one hand, a bunch of seedlings in the other. Behind her, a group of girls bore aloft a little black image of the Baptist—a crude, primitive, grotesque image, its big-eyed head too big for its puny naked torso, bobbing and swaying above the hysterical female horde and looking at once so comical and so pathetic that Don Paeng watching his wife on the sidewalk, was outraged. The image seemed to be crying for help, to be struggling to escape—a St. John indeed in the hands of the Herodias; a doomed captive these witches were subjecting first to their derision; a gross and brutal caricature of his sex.

Don Paeng flashed hotly: he felt that all those women had personally insulted him. He turned to his wife, to take her away—but she was watching greedily, taut and breathless, her head thrust forward and her eyes bulging, the teeth bared in the slack mouth, and the sweat gleaming on her face. Don Paeng was horrified. He grasped her arm—but then just a flash of lightning blazed and the screaming women fell silent: the Tadtarin was about to die. The old woman closed her eyes and bowed her head and sank slowly to her knees. A pallet was brought and set on

the ground and she was laid in it and her face covered with a shroud. Her hands still clutched the wand and the seedlings. The women drew away, leaving her in a cleared space. They covered their heads with their black shawls and began wailing softly, unhumanly—a hushed, animal keening.

Overhead the sky was brightening; silver light defined the rooftops. When the moon rose and flooded with hot brilliance the moveless crowded square, the black-shawled women stopped wailing and a girl approached and unshrouded the Tadtarin, who opened her eyes and sat up, her face lifted to the moonlight. She rose to her feet and extended the wand and the seedlings and the women joined in a mighty shout. They pulled off and waved their shawls and whirled and began dancing again—laughing and dancing with such joyous exciting abandon that the people in the square and on the sidewalks, and even those on the balconies, were soon laughing and dancing, too. Girls broke away from their parents and wives from their husbands to join in the orgy.

“Come, let us go now,” said Don Paeng to his wife. She was shaking with fascination; tears trembled on her lashes; but she nodded meekly and allowed herself to be led away. But suddenly she pulled free from his grasp, darted off, and ran into the crowd of dancing women.

She flung her hands to her hair and whirled and her hair came undone. Then, planting her arms akimbo, she began to trip a nimble measure, an instinctive folk-movement. She tossed her head back and her arched throat bloomed whitely. Her eyes brimmed with moonlight, and her mouth with laughter.

Don Paeng ran after her, shouting her name, but she laughed and shook her head and darted deeper into the dense maze of the procession, which was moving again, towards the chapel. He followed her, shouting; she eluded him, laughing—and through the thick of the female horde they lost and found and lost each other again—she, dancing and he pursuing—till, carried along by the tide, they were both swallowed up into the hot, packed, turbulent darkness of the chapel. Inside poured the entire procession, and Don Paeng, finding himself trapped tight among milling female bodies, struggled with sudden panic to fight his way out. Angry voices roses all about him in the stifling darkness.

“Hoy, you are crushing my feet!”

“And let go of my shawl, my shawl!”

“Stop pushing, shameless one, or I kick you!”

“Let me pass, let me pass, you harlots!” cried Don Paeng.

“Ahah, it is a man!”

“How dare he come in here?”

“Break his head!”

“Throw the animal out!”

“Throw him out! Throw him out!” shrieked the voices, and Don Paeng found himself surrounded by a swarm of gleaming eyes.

Terror possessed him and he struck out savagely with both fists, with all his strength—but they closed in as savagely: solid walls of flesh that crushed upon him and pinned his arms helpless, while unseen hands struck and struck his face, and ravaged his hair and clothes, and clawed at his flesh, as—kicked and buffeted, his eyes blind and his torn mouth salty with blood—he was pushed down, down to his knees, and half-shoved, half-dragged to the doorway and rolled out to the street. He picked himself up at once and walked away with a dignity that forbade the crowd gathered outside to laugh or to pity. Entoy came running to meet him.

“But what has happened to you, Don Paeng?”

“Nothing. Where is the coach?”

“Just over there, sir. But you are wounded in the face!”

“No, these are only scratches. Go and get the señora. We are going home.”

When she entered the coach and saw his bruised face and torn clothing, she smiled coolly.

“What a sight you are, man! What have you done with yourself?” And when he did not answer:

“Why, have they pulled out his tongue too?” she wondered aloud.

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And when they were home and stood facing each other in the bedroom, she was as still as lighthearted.

“What are you going to do, Rafael?”

“I am going to give you a whipping.”

“But why?”

“Because you have behaved tonight like a lewd woman.”

“How I behaved tonight is what I am. If you call that lewd, then I was always a lewd woman and whipping will not change me—though you whipped me till I died.”

“I want this madness to die in you.”

“No, you want me to pay for your bruises.”

He flushed darkly. “How can you say that, Lupe?”

“Because it is true. You have been whipped by the women and now you think to avenge yourself by whipping me.”

His shoulders sagged and his face dulled. “If you can think that of me—”

“You could think me a lewd woman!”

“Oh, how do I know what to think of you? I was sure I knew you as I knew myself. But now you are as distant and strange to me as a female Turk in Africa!”

“Yet you would dare whip me— “

“Because I love you, because I respect you—”

“And because if you ceased to respect me you would cease to respect yourself?”

“Ah, I did not say that!”

“Then why not say it? It is true. And you want to say it, you want to say it!”

But he struggled against her power. “Why should I want to?” He demanded peevishly.

“Because, either you must say it—or you must whip me,” she taunted.

Her eyes were upon him and the shameful fear that had unmanned him in the dark chapel possessed him again. His legs had turned to water; it was a monstrous agony to remain standing. But she was waiting for him speak, forcing him to speak.

“No, I cannot whip you!” he confessed miserably.

“Then say it! Say it!” she cried, pounding her clenched her fists together. “Why suffer and suffer? And in the end, you would only submit.”

But he still struggled stubbornly, “Is it not enough that you have me helpless? Is it not enough that I feel what you want me to feel?”

But she shook her head furiously. “Until you have said it to me, there can be no peace between us.”

He was exhausted at last: he sank heavily to his knees, breathing hard and streaming with sweat, his fine body curiously diminished now in its ravaged apparel.

“I adore you, Lupe,” he said tonelessly.

She strained forward avidly. “What? What did you say?” she screamed.

And he, in his dead voice: “That I adore you. That I adore you. That I worship you. That the air you breathe and the ground you tread is holy to me. That I am your dog. Your slave...”

But it was still not enough. Her fists were still clenched, and she cried: “Then come, crawl on the floor, and kiss my feet!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, he sprawled down flat and, working his arms and legs, gaspingly clawed his way across the floor, like a great agonized lizard, the woman steadily backing away as he approached, her eyes watching him avidly, her nostrils dilating, till behind her loomed the open window, the huge glittering moon, the rapid flashes of lightning. She stopped, panting, and leaned against the sill.

He lay exhausted at her feet, his face flat on the floor. She raised her skirts and contemptuously thrust out a naked foot. He lifted his dripping face and touched his bruised lips to her toes; lifted his hands and grasped the white foot and kissed it savagely—kissed the step, the sole, the frail ankle—while she bit her lips and clutched in pain at the windowsill, her body distended and wracked by horrible shivers, her head flung back and her loose hair streaming out the window—streaming fluid and black in the white night where the huge moon glowed like a sun and the dry air flamed into lightning and the pure heat burned with the immense intense fever of noon.