

FAITH CAN SAVE US

(Rough notes for a novel)

I

When I went to the Baths of Fitero, in order to get some rest for my tired and worn-out body, I happened to meet a strange woman with a beauty that was sweet, but rather faded. I think she was twenty-eight, but her suffering had painted a sign of premature old age on her face. She had led a rather secluded life, and her only companion was an old woman who attended her faithfully wherever she went.

The strange beauty of this unknown woman, a face that revealed some hidden sorrows, her quiet and solitary life, impressed me so much that, even though I hadn't intended to, I began to create a fantasy, an absurd story in which she was the protagonist, the only person around whom this world was revolving.

When we both visited the old Abbey, whose walls still contain the echo of that strange and mysterious *Miserere*, I had the opportunity to speak with the enigmatic woman who had aroused in me such an insatiable curiosity.

Looking for a pretext to start a conversation with her, I offered to serve as her guide, since I was well-acquainted with the ancient Abbey we were going to visit. I don't know who could have told her, but since she had evidently heard that I am a writer, she gladly accepted my offer. It was in this way that our romantic friendship had its beginning.

The day was almost over when our visit to the monastery came to an end. What had made the biggest impression on my lovely companion was the history of the mysterious *Miserere* that was still preserved in the library of the Abbey, about which I had promised to compose a legend.

The day was ending, and the setting sun was filling the horizon with a lovely shade of violet. In the sky, the evening star was trembling like a teardrop.

During our outing I was able to witness the great sorrow that was slowly consuming her life. She had said nothing, but in the depths of her grey eyes I was able to read it like an open book.

II

After our visit to the old Abbey, our friendship grew until it became more and more intimate. Every afternoon I was her companion; I gave her books, and I read her my poems; I also told her things about my life, and she became my adviser in times of doubt and uncertainty.

One afternoon we went to the old monastery again and, little by little, the things she said began to reveal her intimate desires and her secret yearning; without realizing it, as if obeying some hidden fate, she began to tell me the story of her life; it was a sad story, filled with tears and sacrifices, with broken dreams, and sorrows.

And it is a story that my pen has now transferred to the pure virginity of these white sheets of paper.

III

“In an old Castilian city where the ancient stones of the mansions and the churches hold the imprint of many generations like a sacred relic, and whose solitary, twisted streets hold the echoes of distant voices, we lived with our father, a valiant soldier, a hero of worthy endeavors, who discovered conspiracies and was often ready to give his life in order to defend his freedom.

In that city, of which I now only have a dim memory of the greenness of the ivy and the sorrowful sound of the bells, the years of my childhood passed by. My sister Blanca, slightly older than I, who helped me not to miss the sweet caresses of our dead mother, was the only source of happiness in that old house that served as our birthplace; her sweet voice brought a renovating music to our silent sadness, and her laughter cast a sound of springtime onto the thick walls of those dark rooms. Oh, how the mysterious light of her fathomless green eyes still shines in the depths of my soul! And when the sparkling glow of her emerald eyes was lost, my own life became immersed in an eternal night!

I was fourteen years old when my father had to leave the old city where I first saw the light of day, and we went to live in Madrid. We lived on one of the busy streets, in a second-story room where the sun shone brightly through the balconies. Our life started to change. That sunlight had performed the miracle of removing the darkness which the old city in Castile had instilled in our souls.

My father became involved in some political conflicts, and he entered into a period of intense activity. Working in the shadows with some other exiled members of his profession, he was secretly preparing to start the revolutionary movement which, a few months later, broke out in Spain. Our house was converted into the headquarters of the conspiracy. Through it came writers, politicians, members of the military; and among them was the man, whose name has for me become a curse. It was he who extinguished the light in her green eyes!”

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Night had arrived, and the bells of the old Abbey reminded us of the hour of prayer. A prayer blossomed on our lips and, as though obeying some unknown impulse, our hands clasped firmly as if they were sealing a pact. Our souls were united, because they were bound by our sorrow.

And when, lost in the labyrinth of our dreams we silently returned to the city, I seemed to hear the mysterious chords, the strange notes, the immense moan, of the *Miserere* that an inspired pilgrim once wrote in his notebook, and that the monks have now preserved in their library.

IV

In the days which followed, taking advantage of the excursions we were making to the picturesque surroundings of the resort, my sad and beautiful companion continued recounting to me the different chapters of the story of her life.

The pleasant aroma of blossoming flowers, the memory that a beautiful twilight leaves in a sensitive soul, the echo of a distant song which on that afternoon was expressing an

unknown message, something indefinite and immaterial, something of refined subtlety, was present in the intimate drama, the silent tragedy, of my friend:

“A gathering that took place every night in our house became the center of the small conspiracy, and then one day a young poet appeared who had just arrived from Portugal. His name was Alberto Albert. Some of his poems spoke of the struggle for freedom with an impassioned romanticism; but those that touched the depths of my soul and brought tears to my eyes were poems, as short as sighs with a strange rhythm, that expressed love. We became such good friends, and my father became so fond of him, that he was almost one of the family.

Then came the moment of tragedy, the great tragedy which saved my life through a miracle of faith, but which extinguished forever the mysterious emerald light sparkling in my sister's eyes.

In our intimacy, love was growing, little by little. Though neither Blanca or I saw it, like butterflies that unknowingly burn their wings in the flames, we both were attracted to Alberto, who appeared before us as the prince of our dreams. He was like the hero of the romantic stories in the books from our father's library that had been our only distraction during our time in the old city of stone houses filled with the clamor of bells. A poet surrounded by a romantic legend of conspiracies and struggles, his head bedecked with a thick mane of hair, and an infinite boredom reflected in his eyes, what more could our youthful hearts have asked for?

We both hid our passion in the depths of our heart. We knew that if love triumphed in one of us, the other would be profoundly saddened and wither away. Spring in one soul, would be winter in the other. So we both were silent.

One afternoon Blanca was on the balcony, with her graceful hand holding a book: Alberto's poems, beautifully rhymed words, tiny violets giving off the delicate perfume with which poetry speaks of life. Day was dying and the shadows, like a dense curtain, were beginning to spread through the room. Somewhere the sound of a piano playing in a minor key could be heard.

And Alberto came to her. The book dropped from her hand and slid down her skirt. All of the passion she had held back for so long suddenly emerged with all the splendor of a triumphant song. The romantic mane of the poet merged with the glossy, dark curls of my sister; their hands reached for each other, and when they clasped, they expressed much more than vague words uttered by trembling lips.

Without breaking the silence, I slipped into the shadows and watched from the corner of the room. I felt as though my life was slowly ending; my heart was like a bird that longed to break out of its cage, and its beating seemed like the frantic ticking of a clock trying to hasten the passage of time.

That night, the only thing one could see on the balcony was the combined silhouette of two bodies bathed in the light of the moon. My aching soul could bear no more; my life was slipping away like a dry leaf that was propelled by the winds of death. I felt I was losing everything and, like a bird that been wounded during its flight, I fell to the floor without making the slightest complaint. When I woke up, I was in bed, and both of them were beside me. Blanca, her eyes filled with tears, was kissing my forehead. Alberto was clasping my hand, and he seemed to be asking me to forgive him.

Tragedy had spread its wings over all of us. My sickness continued for days and days, and no one knew what was wrong with me. None of the doctors who came to examine

me were able to find a cure for my strange illness. And that is because doctors only know how to cure material things that affect the body. As for things that affect the soul, caused by the failure of an illusion or the loss of hope, they have no idea of what to do, even when they actually believe in them. Larra, whose work taught me how to deal with pain, describes these states very well, perhaps because he, more than anyone, has felt his heart torn apart by an impossible desire. 'Love kills, but it does not kill everyone!...' Those wise words have revealed so many things to me!

Since that night when my life began to fade away, Blanca and Alberto were always with me. However, they never dared to discuss what was really happening, nor did they ever look at each other when I was present.

I knew that my sister's pain was as great as mine, and I could see in her face, and in her sad expression, that on my behalf she had sacrificed her dreams and her hopes which now would be impossible to attain. From that moment, her heart would only be the tomb of love.

Then, the revolution finally broke out in Madrid, and during the month of June of 1854 the city became a battlefield. My father and Alberto, who had waited for this moment, were among the first to enter the battle, and for a while, we had no news of them. From time to time, however, they would come back to let us know they were all right, and then they would return to battle."

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The things my friend told me brought back the memory of my own impetuous youth and, through the magic power of evocation, my life passed before me. I also remembered the romantic revolution which, in time, had achieved the grandeur of a true epic!

Then, it was I who told my friend and confidant the remarkable story of my own past, which I have preserved like a relic in my heart. In this way, I was able to offer the balm of forgetfulness as a cure for her melancholy.

I had not yet gone to Madrid. However, I had begun to make preparations for the trip, and my sketchbook and papers, the keys that I hoped would open the door to immortality, were waiting in the bottom of an old leather suitcase.

One afternoon, while walking through the outskirts of Seville with Narciso Campillo, with the Guadalquivir as our only witness, we made our plans for the battle which would soon begin. In our impetuous fantasies, Madrid was like a beautiful woman whose love would only be given to those who had the ability to conquer it with the gold of their intelligence.

An unknown force was spreading its colorful wings over our insatiable youth. And how painful it can be, when those wings are broken, before the first attempt to fly!

Luis García Luna, the first friend I had in Madrid whose friendship increased as time passed, was the one who told me, because he had witnessed them, about the things which took place in Madrid during the year of '54.

The successful revolution transformed the city into a field of battle. On the streets, barricades were constructed with stones, boxes, and all sorts of domestic utensils, in order to defend those who battled with incredible bravery. Thirsting for vengeance, groups of armed men traveled through the streets under a hail of bullets flying in every direction; the palaces of those officials, whom the people considered the cause of their oppression,

were assaulted, and in the streets large pyramids were constructed with works of art and other belongings. Then, these were set on fire and reduced to ashes.

One afternoon when García Luna was walking through the streets, he witnessed an event of tragic proportions. His steps took him to the Mostenses Plaza, where one of the houses belonged to Francisco Chico, who was then Chief of Police in Madrid and was considered, I think correctly, to be the principal cause of abuse and injustice. A crowd surrounded the building where they searched in vain for the inquisitorial policeman. García Luna joined those who were curious and watched the progress of this strange hunting expedition.

My friend had been there for perhaps a quarter of an hour, when a grim and macabre procession appeared in the entrance to the courtyard: on a cushion supported by a board that a half a dozen men were carrying, was Francisco Chico with the mark of death on his face; his secretary was following behind them with a rope around his neck. Immediately, a loud chorus of curses and insults erupted from the throng of those who were watching. People were eagerly waiting for justice to be done.

The sad procession continued until it reached the Plaza de La Cebada, where Chico, and his servant, were shot without mercy.

All the events of that romantic revolution passed again over my lips that afternoon, like a beautiful story, or a fabulous tale, handed down from one generation to another, leaving behind it a brilliant wake of uneasiness in the souls of those who heard it.

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Night cast its dark wings over us again, and we we walked back to the city, following a narrow road that, in the light of the moon, seemed like a ribbon of silver.

Forming a compact mass of ivory whiteness, a herd of sheep was returning to the fold, accompanied by the sound of their bells. Little by little the stars came out, some of them as bright as diamonds, and others that could barely be seen...

As we walked, we could still see the silhouette of the Abbey outlined on the horizon like the enchanted palace of a legend.

V

For a few days after that we were obliged to remain in rather uncomfortable rooms at the inn, because a rainstorm had turned the resort and its surroundings into a muddy lake. During that time, my friend continued telling me of some incidents in her life that could easily serve as the basis for a strange and interesting novel.

And she said...

VI

“For two days we were filled with uncertainty and uneasiness, when a new misfortune made our lives even more complicated; Alberto was gravely wounded near the barricade

located on the main thoroughfare that had served as bulwark since the beginning of the revolution. That night, hidden from the eyes of curious onlookers, Alberto was carried to our house by my father and two of his best friends. He was brought to one of the isolated rooms of our house where a comfortable bed was prepared. In spite of all our efforts, he died during the early hours of the following day. The last word that came from his lips was the name of my sister.

Thus ended the life of the illustrious hero who inspired our lives with the strength of his romanticism.

My inexplicable sickness, if the sadness that filled my soul could be called a sickness, reached alarming proportions. The doctors were no longer confident that they would be able to find a cure, and they watched helplessly as my life was slowly being extinguished.

All this time I felt like death was chilling my brow and crushing my heart with its cold and implacable hands.

And when all hope seemed to be lost and I would be trapped forever in the embrace of an eternal night, a rare miracle—the enormous faith of my sister—pulled me back to life, and brought me light...

After praying in vain on her knees next to my bed, Blanca made an offer to an ancient effigy that was located in an old church of Madrid: in exchange for my health and my life, she would give up the brilliant light that was shining in the depths of her eyes.

And the miracle happened. Little by little the color returned to my ashen face and bloodless lips; once they were free of the relentless claws which had held them, my lungs started to breathe again, and my heart stopped sounding like the crazy clock that wanted to outstrip the limits of time. A ray of sunlight had entered the twilight of my soul. But as my resurrection was taking place, an inexorable Providence was demanding from my sister the fulfillment of her promise: her beautiful eyes were slowly losing their light.

One day the irrevocable debt was fully paid, and Blanca was blind. Her charming eyes were lifeless, like the eyes of a dead person who has no one to close them.

If you go to the church of***, among the votive offerings on the altar of the Virgin in the most isolated chapel, you will be able to see my sister's eyes, like two tragic jewels. No one else has ever been able to see them, and they have considered my vision to be a hallucination, perhaps the product of an incipient madness. But I know that you will be able to see that which is hidden from the profane eyes of ordinary people. If some day your curiosity as a poet, which causes you to look for new emotions, makes you want to visit the isolated chapel of this church in Madrid and you are able to see this miracle, think of me."

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These were the secret thoughts of my poor, spiritual sister, fragile and sensitive, like a delicate flower. Her words have been forever engraved in my heart, and I can still hear the sound of her gentle voice every time the sight of a beautiful twilight reminds me of her incurable sadness!

Two days later, life brought an end to our intimacy. My friends were waiting for me in Madrid, as were the newspapers whose columns were nourished by pieces of my soul. The relentless need to make a living would allow no further delay. So, placing my books

and papers in my bag I returned to Madrid, carrying in my soul a feeling of melancholy, and in my hair a thread of silver.

Our farewell was quite sad. From my lips came a promise, while a tear passed over the wrinkles that pain had created on my face. The creaky and uncomfortable coach waited for me, and soon the harness of the mules filled the quiet of the afternoon with its silvery tinkling. As long as we could still see each other, our handkerchiefs waved goodbye, like two sad, white doves.

VII

I had been back in Madrid again for almost three months, devoted body and soul to my daily tasks: the Royal Theater, my Swiss associates, the conference of Deputies, the Editorial Office. I moved from one thing to another, as though I were controlled by an invisible power. My mind, filled with new impressions, gradually stopped thinking about our romantic idyll and the revelations of that poor, sick soul. All that remained was a strange harmony, like the vague echo of some beautiful music we have heard somewhere, and will never hear again. In my sketch book, one of my most faithful friends, I had memorialized a few moments from my previous visit. I had thought of writing a novel, a bizarre story about another Danse Macabre, in which both love and death dance together in tragic embrace. My work would be an absurd mixture of silence and darkness, like the *Miserere* that is preserved in the ancient Abbey of Fitero.

But that novel was never written. Today, as a strange melancholy casts its spell over my soul, I am writing these short notes which can serve as the basis of a more complete work, which I will finish someday. Today all I can do is to enjoy the memory and dream, like the studious Faust, who dreamed of a kiss from Margarita.

VIII

One afternoon I was wandering through the narrow streets of old Madrid with no real purpose, while lost in a labyrinth of fantasies that filled the solitary streets with many strange recollections. From every crossroad and from every doorway, different evocative shadows appeared; from the balconies on old, majestic palaces, I seemed to hear music that was played by the hand of a beautiful woman. Ancient palaces! You still have the light from the grand chandeliers that lit your sumptuous chambers with refined gallantry; fragile Marchionesses wearing white wigs weaved in and out as they danced graceful minuets and stately waltzes on the oriental carpets which cover your floors! You still hold the echo of clavichords, and the words of love that you witnessed! Life, all life, with its happiness and its pain, its endless pleasures, and its infinite sorrow, once flourished in you. Now you are only the gray ghost of your former grandeur, the memory of a dead past, a relic...

The sun was about to set, and I decided to stop my wandering and leave behind the memories and the shadows in which I like to immerse myself. Life was calling with an imperative voice. I was walking slowly as I passed by a church whose bells were ringing. As though some unknown voice were speaking in my ear, I remembered that it was this

church where, in one of the chapels, the Virgin had restored the life of my friend, and that among the votive offerings were a woman's green eyes. I entered; around a dozen people were praying in silence. The religious service had ended just a moment ago, and one of the priests was slowly putting out the lights. The church was becoming almost dark. My curiosity made me search for the chapel where the Virgin is worshiped and, by using the information which I still vaguely remembered, I found it right away. With a feeling that was a mixture of faith and fear, I stepped inside.

And there I saw the miracle! In the Virgin's face, a sorrowful image that was the work of some inspired artisan, which had been blackened by the passage of time, two beautiful green eyes were gleaming. A tragic glow of phosphorescent light flowed out of them.

I fell to my knees, and I began to say a prayer; a confused prayer, that was a mixture of my own faith, and sincere admiration for the poor woman who sacrificed the light of her eyes so that, from her endless night, another life would emerge.

How long did I remain there? I cannot say. I was pulled from my reverie by a priest who was rattling a handful of large keys, while the faithful who were passing by my side regarded me as some strange creature who was either a saint or a madman, with the latter a distinct possibility.

But what did they know, poor human beings, of the great battles of the soul?