

IT IS STRANGE!

We were having tea in the house of a lady friend of mine, and we were talking about those social dramas that take place without attracting much attention, whose protagonists we have known, and whose events we may have also contributed to.

There was a slender, blonde young woman with a group of people whom I do not remember; if she had been wearing a crown of flowers rather than the bleary-eyed little dog that was squirming in the folds of her skirt, she could easily have been compared to Shakespeare's Ophelia. And this was because the white skin of her forehead and the blue of her eyes were so pure.

Standing with one hand resting on the velvet settee where the blonde girl was sitting, while his other hand toyed with the links of his golden chain, was a young man whose words had a slight foreign accent, in spite of the fact that his appearance and his manners were as Spanish as those of the Cid, or Bernardo del Carpio.

A tall, older man with a distinguished and affable manner, who was trying to sweeten a cup of tea, completed the group of those who were gathered around the fireplace, where I was enjoying the warmth as I sat down to tell this story. This tale may seem like a story, but in fact, it is true. An entire book could be written about it, and I have done that sometimes in my imagination. Nevertheless, I will tell it with fewer words since, for those who are able to understand it, they should be more than enough.

I

Andrés, because that was the name of the hero of my tale, was one of those men whose heart was filled with many emotions that could not be expressed, as well as a love that he could not give to anyone.

When he became an orphan shortly after he was born, he was taken in by relatives. I don't know anything about his infancy; I only know that, when he mentioned it, his face darkened, and he exclaimed with a sigh: "That is over now!"

This is something we say when we feel sad about the memory of happy things that now have passed. Was this the reason for his words? I repeat; I do not know, but I suspect that it was not the case.

So, Andrés entered life when he was young. Without wanting to give the impression that I am trying to insult them, I have to say that, for poor people, and especially for a certain class of poor people, this world is not a paradise, or anything like it. Andrés was the type of person who, as they say, tries to make the best of his life. Just imagine, then, what it must be like for a person who, while full of love and idealism, was trying his best to accomplish the difficult and mundane task of trying to earn his daily bread.

However, sometimes while he was sitting on the edge of his bed with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, he would exclaim:

"If only I had someone, or something I could love with all my heart! If I only had a woman, a horse, or even a dog!"

Since he had no money, he was not able to find anything that would satisfy his desire to love. This exasperated him to the point that, in his desperation, he began to feel love

for the miserable room where he lived, for its shabby furnishings, and even his landlady, who was his greatest trial.

None of this should be a surprise. Josephus tells us that during the siege of Jerusalem there was so much hunger that mothers even ate their children.

One day he managed to earn barely enough money to live on. That night, when he was crossing a narrow street to return to his house, he heard a whimper, like the sound of a baby crying after it is just born. He took a few more steps and, hearing the sound again, he stopped and exclaimed:

“What the devil is that?”

And just then his foot touched something soft that was moving, and again there was a whimpering sound. It was one of those puppies that people throw in their garbage after they are born, because they don't want to keep them.

“Providence has placed him in my path,” Andrés said to himself, as he picked up the puppy and wrapped it in the tail of his coat.

After that he brought it back to the hovel where he was living.

“What is that!” his landlady grumbled when she saw him enter with the puppy. “We don't need another nuisance in this house. So right now, take it back where you found it, or else tomorrow you can look for someplace else to live!”

The next day Andrés left the house and, during the next two or three months, he left several others for the same reason. But all of these setbacks, and many others that are difficult to describe, were compensated by the affection that he received from the dog, who provided comfort to a person who has had to spend endless hours in solitude and melancholy. They ate together, they rested together, and together they went for walks, sometimes traveling the entire length of the road to the Carabancheles.

Parties, excursions, theaters, cafés, any place where dogs were not permitted or caused problems, were avoided by our hero, who responded to the affection he got from his little companion by saying, with all the warmth of his soul:

“Little doggie, the only thing you cannot do is speak!”

II

It would be tedious to describe all the details of how it happened, but Andrés was eventually able to improve his lot, and when he had a little money he lamented:

“If I only had a woman! But before a man like me is able to have a woman, he would need to have something to offer her, and in Madrid, that would cost an arm and a leg... If only I could buy a horse. A horse! There is no animal more noble or more beautiful. And how it would love my little dog! How they would enjoy playing together, and I with them!”

One afternoon he went to the bullring and, before the bullfights began, he went to the stables to look at the horses that would take part in the battle.

I don't know if any of my readers has ever had the desire to go and see them. For my part, I can assure them that, although I may not have had the same feeling my protagonist experienced, I sometimes felt like I would like to purchase all the horses, because of the pity I felt for them.

Andrés could not help but feel a sensation of sadness when he arrived at the stables. Some of the horses were downcast, with their skin stuck to their bones and their mane dirty and disheveled, motionlessly waiting for their turn, as though they could foresee the death that, in a short time, would put an end to the miserable life they had been forced to endure. Others were half blind and sniffed, trying smell the manger so they could eat, or they struck the ground with their hooves and whinnied as they struggled and tried to flee the terrible danger they felt. And all of those animals once were young and beautiful. Just think how many must have felt the loving hands that caressed their necks! Just think how many must have heard affectionate voices that encouraged them to gallop! And now they were greeted with curses, with whipping, and eventually, death, a painful death that was accompanied by cheering and whistling.

“If they can think,” Andrés said, “what must these animals feel in the depths of their limited intelligence, when in the middle of the plaza they bite their tongues and die with a horrible spasm! In truth, the ungratefulness of men is sometimes inconceivable.”

He was shaken out of these reflections by the gravelly voice of one of the picadors who was swearing and cursing as he rested the tip of his spear against the wall and tested the legs of one of the horses. The horse didn't appear to be in bad shape. Evidently, it was difficult to control, or it must have some serious illness.

Andrés considered buying it, thinking that it probably wouldn't cost very much, but then, taking care of it?... The picador placed his spear over his shoulder and was about to leave, but after hesitating for a moment, the young man reached out and stopped him. I don't know how he did it, but in less than fifteen minutes he convinced the rider to wait: then he looked for the supplier, he settled the deal, and the horse was his.

I don't think it is necessary to say that he didn't go to see the bullfights. He took the horse and found that it did, in fact, seem to be a little wild and difficult to control.

“Don't be afraid to use the whip,” his former master had told him. “Let it eat what it wants, and let it do whatever it feels like.”

The horse was still young, and it soon began to gain weight and become more docile. It did have its capricious moments, and no one except Andrés was able to mount it. But, the latter commented,

“That way no one can ask to borrow it, and as for its tricks, we will both have to get used to dealing with them.”

And they did get used to each other, so much so, that Andrés was able to tell when the horse wanted to do something, or when it didn't; and all he had to do was use his voice get the horse to jump, or stop, or gallop away like a flash.

And then there was the dog; he became so comfortable with his new friend that neither went to drink without the other. Now, when his horse galloped off in a cloud of dust on the road to the Carabancheles and the dog accompanied him, or when the dog got ahead and turned to look back at him, or stopped to let him catch up again, Andrés felt like the happiest of men.

III

Some time passed and Andrés became rich, or almost rich. One day, after traveling for some distance, he became tired and got down, going to rest in the shade of a tree. It was

a bright, blue day of springtime. It was a day when one feels a warm atmosphere that is filled with desires, a day when there are gusts of wind that carry distant harmonies, when the clear horizon is tinted with gold, when tiny, bright particles float before our eyes, intangible and transparent particles that follow us and surround us, making us feel both sadness and happiness.

“I love those two creatures so much!” Andrés declared after sitting down and caressing his dog with one hand while, with the other, he offered a handful of grass to his horse. “But there is still a hollow in my heart that has never been filled. I still have not been able to show the greatest affection, the affection that is the most sacred and pure. For that, I need to have a woman.”

At that very moment a young girl walked down the road with a pitcher on her head. Andrés was not thirsty, but he asked for a drink of water. The girl stopped to offer him some, and she did so with such courtesy and friendliness that our young man was able to understand perfectly one of the most sacred episodes of the Bible.

“What is your name?” he asked, after he had finished drinking.

“Plácida.”

“And what is it you do for a living?”

“I am the daughter of a tradesman who died after he was persecuted and ruined for his political opinions. After his death, my mother and I withdrew to a village where we can barely manage, with a pension of just three reals as our only income. My mother is sick, and I have to do everything.”

“Any why didn’t you get married?”

“I don’t know. In the village they say that I am no good at working, that I am too weak and too young.”

After saying goodbye, the girl left and, as he watched her depart, Andrés was silent. When she had disappeared from sight, he said with the satisfaction of someone who has just solved a problem:

“That is the woman I need.”

He mounted his horse and, followed by his dog, he headed for the village. It did not take him long to get to know the mother, and almost as quickly, he fell madly in love with her daughter. When, after several months her mother died and she was an orphan, he married the woman he loved so much, which is one of the happiest things a man can do in this life.

After he was married, it took Andrés only a short time to settle down in a nice country home in one of the most picturesque locations in this country. And when he saw himself in it as a wealthy man, with his wife, his dog, and his horse, he had to rub eyes, because he felt like he was dreaming. Our poor Andrés was happy; completely happy.

IV

He continued living that way for several years as though blessed by God, when one night he thought he saw someone lurking around his house, and later he surprised a man meddling with the lock of the door to the garden.

“We’ve got robbers,” he said. And he was determined to notify the nearby town where there was a pair of Civil Guards.

“Where are you going?” his wife asked him.

“To the town.”

“What for?”

“To inform the authorities that I suspect that someone is prowling around our house.”

When she heard this, his wife frowned and turned slightly pale. However, he gave her a kiss and continued speaking:

“I am going to go on foot, because it is only a short distance. Goodbye. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

As he went through the patio and headed toward the door, he stepped into the stable for a moment. He looked at his horse and, while he patted him, he said:

“Goodbye, old fellow, goodbye. You can rest today, because yesterday I gave you a real workout.”

Since he was accustomed to going with his master every day, the horse whinnied sadly, when it saw him leaving.

Then, when Andrés was about to depart, his dog started barking loudly.

“No, you can’t come with me,” he said to it, as if it could understand. “Whenever you come with me to the town, you bark at the boys and chase after the chickens, and one of these days, they are going to give you such a drubbing you won’t want to come back...” Before he left he said to one of the servants, “Don’t let the dog get out until I leave,” and he closed the gate so that it couldn’t follow him.

After he had passed the bend in the road, he was still able to hear the dog howling in the distance.

He went to the town, spoke with the authorities, took some time to chat with the mayor about several matters, and then he walked back to his farm. When he arrived at the edge of his property, he was surprised that the dog did not come to greet him, since it always seemed to know whenever he was approaching... He whistled, but nothing! He entered the gate. Not even a servant!

“What the devil is going on here?” he exclaimed with worry, as he headed toward the farm buildings.

When he entered the patio, the first thing he saw was his dog lying in a pool of blood in the doorway to the stable. Some torn pieces of clothing that were lying on the ground and some blood-covered threads that were still hanging from its jaws showed that it had tried to defend itself and had been severely wounded in the process.

Andrés said its name. The dying dog opened its eyes, and it made a futile effort to get up. It wagged its tail slowly and tried to lick his hand, but in spite of its efforts, it finally succumbed.

“My horse... Where is my horse?” Andrés cried with a voice that was choked with emotion, on seeing that the stable was empty.

He burst out of the stable like a madman and called for his wife, but no one answered. There was no sign of his servants. Beside himself, he raced through the entire house..., but it was deserted. He went back out to the road. He saw the hoof prints of a horse; they were made by his horse, of that he was certain, because he could tell that they were the hoof prints of his favorite animal.

“It’s obvious,” he said, as if hit by a sudden realization; “the robbers took advantage of my absence to do their dirty work, and now they are taking my wife so they can demand a large ransom. Money? I would give my blood or my salvation for her!”

Oh, my poor dog!” he cried on seeing him again, and then he began to run, following the direction of the hoof prints.

He ran without resting, always following the prints, for an hour, two hours, three... Whenever he saw someone, he asked: “Have you seen a man on a horse with a woman riding behind him?”

“Yes,” they responded.

“Where were they going?”

“That way.”

Andrés gathered his strength and continued running.

It was now getting dark. Whenever he repeated his question, he got the same answer. He ran and he ran, until finally he could see a village, and by the entrance, at the foot of a cross that was located at a fork in the road, he saw a group of people—farmers, old men, and boys—who were looking at something he was unable to see.

After he approached them, he asked the same question again. One member of the group told him:

“Yes, we saw a man and a woman. And there... from the look of it, their horse died of exhaustion after running for such a long time.”

Andrés looked in the direction he was pointing and, in fact, he saw his beloved horse, who some men of the village were getting ready to skin so they could use the hide. He could scarcely restrain his emotions but, as he got control of himself, he stopped to think of what must have happened to his wife.

“Please tell me,” he said hurriedly; “why didn’t you give some help to that unfortunate woman?”

“We did help her,” one of them insisted. “I was very happy to sell them another horse so they could continue their journey as soon as possible, since they seemed to be in such a hurry.”

“But...,” Andrés interrupted, “that woman was kidnapped. The man was a thief who paid no attention to her tears and her pleas, and he was carrying her off to some unknown location.”

The the members of this group of country folk looked at each other knowingly, as they smiled at his sign of compassion.

“Come on, lad! What kind of story are you trying to tell us?” one of the asked him. “Kidnapped? Why, she was the one who was in the biggest rush. ‘Hurry, hurry...’ she was saying. ‘We have to get out of this place now. I won’t feel right until we lose sight of it forever!’ And then they left immediately.”

By then, Andrés began to understand. A cloud filled his eyes, which did not shed a tear, and he fell to the ground like a corpse.

He went mad. And in a few days... he was dead.

An autopsy was done, and they were unable to find the cause of his death. But if it were only possible to dissect the soul, how many similar deaths might they not be able to explain!

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“So you’re telling us he died because of that?” the young man exclaimed with surprise, as he toyed with the links of his chain after I finished my story.

I looked at him as if to say, “You don’t think that is reason enough?” but he continued speaking, with an expression of doubt still on his face.

“It is strange. I know what it is to suffer. In one of my last races, when my *Herminia* stumbled, it killed the *jockey* and broke her leg. I felt terrible; but not *that* terrible...”

Now it was my turn to look at him with doubt, when I heard a pleasant voice that was coming from behind me; it was the voice of the young girl with blue eyes:

“Yes, it is strange. I love my *Medoro*” she said, as she gave a kiss to the muzzle of her shy and bleary-eyed lapdog who growled quietly, “but if he died, or they were to kill him, I don’t think I would go crazy, or anything like that.”

By now I was completely dumbfounded. Those people had not understood me, or else they chose not to understand me.

I turned to the man who was drinking tea who, because of his advanced years, ought to have a little more understanding.

“And you, what do you think?” I asked him.

“Yes, I will tell you what I think,” he replied. “I was married, I loved my wife, and I am still fond of her. We had a domestic dispute which, because of its notoriety, required some redress on my part. There was a duel, and I had the good fortune to be able to wound my opponent. It turned out that he is a remarkable young man, both witty and cheerful, and we still get together sometimes for coffee. After that I stopped living with my wife, and I devoted myself to my travels. When I am in Madrid, I still stay with her, but only as a friend, and I do that without feeling awkward, and without suffering regret. After this rough outline of my character and my life, what else can I tell you, except that such a phenomenal explosion of sentiment is indeed strange; very strange!”

While he was speaking, the blonde girl, and the young man who seemed to be in love with her, were looking at a collection of caricatures by Gavarni. After he was done, he started drinking his third cup of tea.

When I thought about how they had responded to the outcome of my story by saying, “it is strange!” I said to myself: “but it is natural!”