

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF SPANISH SHORT STORIES

Edited by
Margaret Jull Costa

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF SPANISH SHORT STORIES

MARGARET JULL COSTA has translated the works of many Spanish and Portuguese writers, among them novelists: Javier Marías, José Saramago and Eça de Queiroz, and poets: Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Ana Luísa Amaral. Her work has brought her numerous prizes, most recently the 2018 Premio Valle-Inclán for *On the Edge* by Rafael Chirbes. In 2014 she was awarded an OBE for services to literature.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The Penguin Book of Spanish Short Stories

Introduced and edited by
MARGARET JULL COSTA

PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2021
001

Introduction copyright © Margaret Jull Costa, 2021
Translation copyright © Margaret Jull Costa, Thomas Bunstead,
Peter Bush, Kit Maude, Kathryn Phillips-Miles, Simon Deefholts, 2021

The moral rights of the authors and translators have been asserted

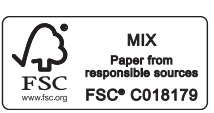
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–39050–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

Contents

Introduction by Margaret Jull Costa xi

BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS
The Novel on the Tram 1

EMILIA PARDO BAZÁN
The Talisman 24

LEOPOLDO ALAS, 'CLARÍN'
Duet for Two Coughs 30

MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO
The Likeness 37

RAMÓN DEL VALLE-INCLÁN
The Poor Wee Child 42

PÍO BAROJA
The Unknown 46

AZORÍN
The Reverse Side of the Tapestry 49

EDUARDO BLANCO AMOR
The Biobardos 55

JOSEP PLA
Counterpoint 61

ROSA CHACEL
The Genie of the Night and the Genie of the Day 70

RAFAEL DIESTE
Light and Silence 76

Copyrighted Material

RAMÓN J. SENDER
The Boy 79

MAX AUB
Ingratitude 81

MERCÈ RODOREDA
Like Silk 84

ÁLVARO CUNQUEIRO
Jacinto's Umbrella 92

PERE CALDERS
Feat of Arms 95

ALONSO ZAMORA VICENTE
On a Visit 97

JULIÁN AYESTA
At the Beach 101

MIGUEL DELIBES
On Such a Night 105

CARMEN LAFORET
The Return 115

IGNACIO ALDECOA
Come Twelve o'Clock 121

ANA MARÍA MATUTE
Conscience 127

MEDARDO FRAILE
Berta's Presence 133

CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE
Behind the Eyes 138

JOSEFINA RODRÍGUEZ ALDECOA
Madrid, Autumn, Saturday 143

RAFAEL SÁNCHEZ FERLOSIO
The Recidivist 149

Copyrighted Material

JUAN BENET
Reichenau 152

JUAN MARSÉ
The Street of the Sleeping Dragon 157

ESTHER TUSQUETS
Summer Orchestra 163

ÁLVARO POMBO
Luzmila 173

JOSÉ MARÍA MERINO
The Deserter 185

MARINA MAYORAL
Then He Began to Forget 190

CRISTINA FERNÁNDEZ CUBAS
A Fresh Start 196

JUAN JOSÉ MILLÁS
She's Everywhere 206

VICENTE MOLINA FOIX
The Real Hairdresser 210

SOLEDAD PUÉRTOLAS
Traffic Jam 225

CARME RIERA
The Return Home 228

ENRIQUE VILA-MATAS
Sea Swell 234

JAVIER MARÍAS
A Sense of Camaraderie 245

BERNARDO ATXAGA
Teresa, poverina mia 254

QUIM MONZÓ
The Fullness of Summer 266

Copyrighted Material

PALOMA DÍAZ-MAS
In Search of a Photograph 268

JULIO LLAMAZARES
Balancing the World on His Chin 272

MANUEL RIVAS
The Butterfly's Tongue 275

CARLOS CASTÁN
The Usher 286

TERESA SOLANA
The Second Mrs Appleton 289

JAVIER CERCAS
Against Optimism 297

ELOY TIZÓN
About the Wedding 300

KARMELE JAIO
The Scream 309

JESÚS CARRASCO
10.10.10 316

JAVIER MONTES
Hotel Life 329

HARKAITZ CANO
The Keys to the Apartment 342

EIDER RODRÍGUEZ
And Shortly After That, Now 348

ELVIRA NAVARRO
Love 360

CRISTINA GARCÍA MORALES
The Generation Gap 368

AIXA DE LA CRUZ
True Milk 370

Copyrighted Material

Copyright information 379
My Fellow Translators 387
Translator's Acknowledgements 389

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

An anthology, etymologically speaking, is a gathering or collection of flowers, and in this anthology my aim has been to gather together a collection of really fine flowers, stories dating from the nineteenth century to the present day, including writers across all of Spain's four languages – Basque (*euskara*), Castilian Spanish (*castellano*), Catalan (*català*) and Galician (*galego*). Choosing what to include was both a delight and a torment, a delight because it involved reading so many wonderful stories, most of which were entirely new to me, and a torment because choosing meant having to pick only some and not others. There are, inevitably, omissions (Juan Goytisolo, Dulce Chacón, Camilo José Cela, Antonio Muñoz Molina, Laura Freixas, to name but a few), but I also wanted, where possible, to choose and translate stories that hadn't previously been translated into English or which, in my entirely biased opinion, would benefit from a fresh translation. A confession: while I can read Spanish and Galician (which is very like Portuguese), I do not read Basque or Catalan. In the case of Basque, I have based my translations on the Castilian versions made by the authors themselves. In the case of Catalan, I turned to my colleague Peter Bush for his translations of Josep Pla, Quim Monzó and Teresa Solana. However, I could not resist doing my own translations of the stories by Catalan writers Carme Riera and Mercè Rodoreda, basing my translation of the former on the author's self-translation and of the latter on the excellent translation by Clara Janés. I learned later that in Riera's Spanish version of her own story she made radical changes, including cutting the first two pages of the original. She even changed the title: in the Catalan version it is *Retorn a casa* (Homecoming), in the Castilian version it is simply *Volver* (Return). A translation in more than one sense!

For me, the short story is not a truncated novel, but is more akin, perhaps, to poetry. The best stories create a world in just a few pages, just as the best

Copyrighted Material

poetry (in my view) encapsulates a moment in a few words or lines. It is never wise to read poem after poem, and it seems to me a mistake to read any collection of stories one after the other. Think of this rather as a box of chocolates; savour and ponder each story one or, at most, two at a time.

People have, it seems, always told stories, and, in Spain, the custom of the *cuento* can perhaps be traced back to the Arab tradition of story-telling, given that the Moors were a potent presence in Spain for more than seven hundred years. Those spoken stories from India, Persia and Arabia were, of course, later set down in such books as *The Arabian Nights*, but in Spain the story in its written form is usually deemed to have begun with the anonymous picaresque 'novel' *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), which wove together a series of stories all featuring a young lad and his many masters. This form was developed further by Cervantes in his *Exemplary Novels* (1613), which comprises twelve unconnected and very diverse stories. Cervantes was using the word 'novel' to distinguish his written fiction from the oral story, or *cuento*; over time, *novela* came to mean 'novel' and *cuento*, 'short story'. As in the rest of Europe, the written *cuento* really came into its own with the growth of literacy, the advent of the steam printing press, and the subsequent popularity of newspapers and magazines. In the early 1800s, Mariano José de Larra wrote what were called *cuadros de costumbres*, descriptions of contemporary life, often with a sharp, satirical edge. The short story as we know it really took off in Spain in the late nineteenth century, with novelists like Galdós, Pardo Bazán and Leopoldo Alas, and, as elsewhere in the world, it has to this day remained an essential genre for most writers.

In choosing the stories, I didn't think in thematic terms at all, but themes have emerged of their own accord. Perhaps inevitably, many of the stories deal directly or obliquely with the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939, and had a devastating effect on society both during and long afterwards. The stories included here cover both the brutality and the absurdity of war (Sender and Calders), the terrible divisions caused by any civil war (Rivas), the lingering grief and loss (Merino and Rodríguez), and the grim aftermath of poverty, repression and even mental illness (Delibes, Marsé and Laforet).

Realism and social comment are, of course, bound up in that first theme, but other stories reveal other lives from the various social classes:

Copyrighted Material

the impoverished working class (Ignacio Aldecoa and Pombo), the wealthy middle class (Tusquets, Ayesta and Monzó), and the sunken middle class who don't quite fit in anywhere (Alas and Pla). Women also feature strongly (both as authors and characters), from put-upon, frightened or bored-rigid wives (Rodoreda, Matute and Baroja), to the woes or otherwise of the independent woman (Josefina Aldecoa and Millás), to the hormonal confusion of an adolescent girl (Puértolas).

As I read and re-read the collection, I was also very struck by how much fantasy there was in these stories. This may, of course, have to do with my own tastes, but while the fantastic and the ghostly have long been a strong thread in British and American fiction (thanks, perhaps, to Poe), I have always tended to think of Spanish literature as staunchly realist. Yet here, from the nineteenth century (Galdós and Pardo Bazán) up to the present day (Aixa de la Cruz), we have that same fascination with the inexplicable, and with the wilder side of our imaginations (Chacel, Rodoreda, Benet, Vila-Matas and Cubas).

There is also, thank heavens, a great deal of humour, sometimes black (Marías and Solana), sometimes absurd (Galdós and Cunqueiro), sometimes just very acutely observed (Molina Foix, Fraile and Cercas), and sometimes just joyfully playful (Azorín).

I have also included three pieces (Carrasco, Díaz-Mas and Cercas) which are, strictly speaking, memoir, but I was encouraged by biographer Claire Tomalin's comment that while the (auto)biographer cannot invent, he or she does still need imagination. And given our human tendency to lie or misremember or elaborate on the facts, any memoir is always tinged with fiction.

The stories are arranged chronologically according to the author's date of birth, but, as with any anthology, there is a delightful randomness about subject matter and style and tone, shifting from an absurd tram journey with a man who cannot tell fact from fiction to the jittery owner of what might be a magical talisman to two lonely hotel guests finding solace of sorts to a simpleton finding friendship for the first time, and those are just the first four stories. Feel free to read the stories in any order that takes your fancy, but, remember, only one or two at a time.

Margaret Jull Costa

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

BENITO PÉREZ GALDÓS

The Novel on the Tram

I

The tram was setting off from one end of the Salamanca neighbourhood and heading across Madrid in the direction of Pozas. Gripped by the selfish desire to get a seat before all the other passengers – who, naturally, had precisely the same intention – I grabbed the handrail of the stairs leading to the upper deck, placed one foot on the platform and climbed aboard, but at that very instant – I should have seen it coming! – I collided with another traveller entering from the other side. When I looked at him, I saw that he was my friend, Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina, a sensible, inoffensive fellow, who, on the occasion in question, was kind enough to greet me with an enthusiastic, heartfelt handshake.

Our unexpected collision had no major consequences, if you discount a slight dent inflicted on the straw hat perched on the head of an Englishwoman who was attempting to board the tram behind my friend and who, doubtless due to a lack of agility on her part, received a blow to her bonnet from his walking stick.

We sat down and, dismissing the incident as unimportant, started chatting.

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843–1920) is considered to be Spain's greatest nineteenth-century novelist, on a par with Dickens and Balzac. Born in the Canary Islands, he moved to Madrid when he was nineteen and spent most of his adult life there. He wrote novels, plays and stories, his masterpiece being *Fortunata y Jacinta*. Although his work is usually described as Realist, there is often an element of the fantastic in his writing (as in this story), and this was perhaps what attracted the film-maker Luis Buñuel, who based three of his films on Galdós novels: *Viridiana*, *Nazarín* and *Tristana*.

Copyrighted Material

Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina is a celebrated doctor – although his fame does not rest on his deep knowledge of pathology – and a thoroughly decent man, of whom no one has ever said that he was likely to steal other people's property or kill a fellow human being other than in the pursuit of his dangerous and scientific profession. It is true that the trust he inspires in a multitude of families from all strata of society has much to do with his pleasant manner and his indulgent way of giving his patients only the treatment they want, but it is also a well-known fact that, in his bounty, he provides other services too, always of a rigorously honest nature, but which have nothing to do with science.

He knows more interesting things about people's private lives than anyone else, and is an obsessive asker of questions, although he makes up for the vice of over-inquisitiveness by his equal readiness to tell you everything he knows about other people without your even having to ask. You can imagine, then, how eagerly the curious and the loose-tongued seek out the company of this fine example of human indiscretion.

This gentleman and friend – well, he's a friend to everyone – was the person sitting next to me as the tram slid smoothly over the rails down Calle de Serrano, stopping now and then to fill up the few remaining empty seats. Indeed, we were soon so crammed together that I was hard put to know what to do with the parcel of books I had with me, and which I placed first on one knee and then on the other. In the end, fearing that I might be bothering the English lady sitting to my left, I decided to perch on top of it.

II

'And where are you off to?' Cascajares asked, peering at me over his blue spectacles, which made me feel as if I were being scrutinized by two pairs of eyes.

I gave a somewhat evasive response, and he, doubtless not wishing to miss the opportunity of gleaning some useful snippet of information, asked further questions, along the lines of 'And what's So-and-so up to these days? And where's So-and-so living?' and other similar enquiries, none of which received very fulsome replies.

Copyrighted Material

Finding each attempt at conversation blocked, he finally set off along the path best suited to his expansive temperament and began to blab.

'Poor Countess!' he said, shaking his head and adopting an expression of selfless compassion. 'If she had followed my advice, she wouldn't be in the appalling situation in which she finds herself now.'

'No, of course,' I replied mechanically, thus paying the Countess my own brief tribute of compassion.

'You see,' he went on, 'she has allowed herself to become completely dominated by that man, and he'll be master of the house one day. The poor thing thinks she can solve everything by weeping and wailing, but it's not true. She should act now, because the man's an out-and-out bounder and, I believe, capable of the most heinous of crimes.'

'Oh, yes, awful,' I said, unthinkingly sharing in his imaginings.

'It's the same with all men of evil instincts and low social status when they rise a little in the world. They become utterly insufferable. One look at his face will tell you that no good will come of him.'

'Absolutely. It stands out a mile.'

'Let me explain the situation to you briefly. The Countess is an excellent woman, angelic, as discreet as she is beautiful, and she really does deserve better luck. However, she is married to a man who does not appreciate what a treasure he has and who devotes his life to gambling and all manner of other illicit pastimes. She, meanwhile, grows bored and weeps. Is it any surprise, then, that she should try to mask her sorrow by seeking honest entertainment elsewhere, wherever there's a piano? Indeed, I myself have told her as much. "Countess," I said, "life is too short, you need some diversion. In the end, the Count will repent of his folly, and your sorrows will be at an end." And I think I'm right.'

'Oh, I'm sure you are!' I said officiously, although I was as indifferent to the Countess's misfortunes then as I had been at the beginning.

'That's not the worst of it, though,' added Cascajares, striking the floor with his walking stick. 'Now the Count has got it into his head to be jealous, yes, of a certain young man who has undertaken to "amuse" the Countess.'

'It will be the envious husband's fault if he succeeds.'

'Now given that the Countess is virtue personified, none of this would

Copyrighted Material

matter, no, none of this would matter if there were not a dastardly fellow involved, who, I suspect, will bring disaster down upon the household.'

'Really? And who is this fellow?' I asked, my curiosity piqued.

'A former butler, of whom the Count is very fond, and who has set out to make that poor unhappy, sensitive lady suffer. It seems he is in possession of a compromising secret and with that weapon intends to . . . well, I don't know quite what exactly. It's disgraceful!'

'It certainly is, and he deserves to be made an example of,' I said, joining him in unleashing my fury on the man.

'But *she* is innocent, *she* is an angel. Oh, but here we are at Cibeles already, yes, there's the Parque de Buenavista on the right. Stop the tram will you, my boy. I'm not one of those men who likes to jump off while the tram is moving and risk cracking my skull open on the paving stones. Goodbye, my friend, goodbye.'

The tram stopped and Señor Dionisio Cascajares de la Vallina got off, having once more shaken my hand and caused a second dent in the English lady's hat, had not yet recovered from the first assault.

III

I remained on the tram, and, the odd thing is, I continued to think about that unknown Countess, about her cruel, suspicious consort and, above all, about the sinister man who, to use the doctor's colourful turn of phrase, was about to bring disaster down upon the household. Consider, dear reader, the nature of the human mind: when Cascajares began telling me about those events, I found it irrelevant and boring, but it took scarcely a moment for my imagination to take up that same affair and turn it over and over in my mind, a psychological operation doubtless stimulated by the regular motion of the tram and the dull, monotonous sound of its wheels, grinding away at the iron rails.

In the end, though, I stopped thinking about what, in fact, held little real interest for me and, looking around the carriage, I began examining my fellow passengers carefully, one by one. Such different faces and such diverse expressions! Some seemed quite indifferent to those sitting next to them, while others reviewed the assembled crowd with impertinent

Copyrighted Material

curiosity; some were happy, others sad, one man was yawning, and another fellow further off was laughing; and, despite the brevity of the journey, not a few were impatient for it to end, for there is nothing more annoying than being in the company of a dozen or so people all gazing at each other in silence and counting each other's wrinkles and moles and any other imperfections on face or clothing.

It's strange, that brief meeting with people we have never seen before and whom we will probably never see again. When we get on the tram, there is usually someone else already there; others get on afterwards; some get off, leaving us alone and then, finally, we get off too. It's an image of human life, in which being born and dying are like those entrances and exits I've described, and which, as the generations of travellers come and go, are constantly renewing the small world of the tram. They enter and leave, they are born and die. How many have been here before us! How many will come afterwards!

And, to make the resemblance more complete, a tram contains a miniature world of passions. We judge many of those we see there to be excellent people, we like their looks and are even saddened when they leave. Then there are others who, on the contrary, we loathe on sight: we hate them for ten minutes, rather rancorously examine their phrenological character and feel real pleasure when they leave. And, meanwhile, the tram, that imitation of human life, keeps moving, constantly receiving and letting go, uniform, tireless, majestic, indifferent to what is going on inside, entirely unstirred by the barely repressed emotions of that dumbshow, always travelling along those two endless parallel lines, as long and slippery as the centuries.

IV

I remained immersed in this ocean of unsettling thoughts as the tram continued up Calle de Alcalá, until I was snatched from them by the sound of my parcel of books hitting the floor. I immediately picked the parcel up, and my eyes fell on the piece of newspaper that served as a wrapping for the books and so I idly read a line or two of print. My curiosity was immediately aroused. Certain names scattered over that scrap

Copyrighted Material

of newsprint caught both my eye and my memory. I searched for the beginning of the article, but could not find it. The paper was torn and, initially out of mere curiosity and subsequently with growing fascination, this is what I read:

> The Countess was in a state of indescribable agitation. She was continually troubled by the presence of Mudarra, the insolent butler, who, forgetting his lowly origins, had dared to set his sights on her, a creature so far above him. The villain was constantly spying on her, watching her as one might watch one's prey. He was unconstrained by respect, and neither the sensibility nor the delicacy of that excellent lady proved an obstacle to his ignoble stalking of her.
>
> Mudarra entered the Countess's bedroom late one night, and she, pale and agitated, and filled at once by shame and terror, lacked the courage to dismiss him.
>
> 'Do not be afraid, Countess,' he said with a forced, sinister smile that only increased the lady's anxiety. 'I have not come to harm you in any way.'
>
> 'Oh, dear God, when will this torment cease?' cried the Countess, letting one arm droop by her side in despair. 'Leave my room this instant, I cannot give in to your desires. How shameful to abuse both my weakness and the indifference of my husband, who is the sole author of my many misfortunes.'
>
> 'Why so upset, Countess?' asked the fearsome butler. 'If I did not hold the key to your perdition in my hand, if I could not divulge to the Count details regarding a certain young gentleman . . . but I will not make use of those terrible weapons. One day, you will understand when you see how selfless is the love I feel for you.'
>
> When he said this, Mudarra took a few steps towards the Countess, who drew back from the monster in horror and repugnance.
>
> Mudarra was a man of about fifty, dark, squat and bow-legged, with a bristling brush of wiry hair, a large mouth and prominent eye-teeth. His eyes, half-hidden beneath his beetling black brows, were filled at that moment by the most bestial and urgent feelings of concupiscence.

Copyrighted Material

'Ah, such coldness!' he exclaimed angrily, when he saw the lady's understandable indifference. 'If only I were a certain impeccably turned-out young man! Why so fastidious when you know I could easily tell the Count . . . And he would believe me, you can be sure of that; the Count has such confidence in me that anything I tell him he takes to be the Gospel truth. And, given how jealous he is, if I were to give him that little piece of paper . . .'

'You villain!' cried the Countess in a fit of noble indignation. 'I am innocent, and my husband would never give ear to such vile calumnies. And, even if I were guilty, rather than buy my peace of mind at such a price, I would prefer a thousand times over to be despised by my husband and by everyone else. Get out of here this minute.'

'I have a temper too, Countess,' said the butler, swallowing his rage, 'yes, I, too, have a temper, and when thwarted . . . But since you're being so unpleasant, let's continue in that vein. I know what I have to do now. I have been far too indulgent for far too long. For the last time, I ask that we be friends. Don't force me to do something foolish, Countess . . .'

As he said this, Mudarra arranged his parchment-yellow skin and the stiff tendons of his face into something resembling a smile and advanced a few steps as if about to sit down on the sofa next to the Countess. She leapt to her feet, crying:

'Get out of here, you scoundrel! You know perfectly well I have no one to defend me! Get out of here!'

The butler was like a wild beast who has let slip the prey he had held for a moment in his claws. He snorted, made a threatening gesture and then, very slowly and quietly, left the room. The Countess, trembling and breathless, cowering in a corner, listened as his footsteps gradually moved off, the sound muffled by the rugs in the next room. When she thought he had gone, she could finally breathe more easily. She locked all the doors and tried to sleep, but sleep eluded her, her eyes still filled by the terrifying image of the monster.

Chapter XI. *The plot* – When Mudarra left the Countess, he went straight to his own room and, in the grip of a terrible nervous disquiet, began leafing through various papers and letters, muttering: 'I've had enough, she'll pay dearly for this . . .' Then he sat down, took up his

Copyrighted Material

pen, and set before him one of those letters, which he studied closely before beginning another, trying to copy the handwriting. He kept glancing feverishly from one to the other, and at last, after much labour, he wrote the following letter – in a hand identical to that of the original: *I promised to see you, and I hasten . . .*

The newspaper was torn at this point and I could read no more.

V

With my eyes still fixed on the parcel, I began thinking about the connection between what I had heard from Señor Cascajares de la Vallina and the scene I had just read about in that rag, a serial doubtless translated from some ridiculous novel by Ponson du Terrail or Montépin. I know it's nonsense, I said to myself, but the fact is she intrigues me, this Countess, this victim of the barbarous machinations of a ruthless butler, who only exists in the crazed mind of some novelist born to terrify simple folk. How will the wretch take his revenge? He would be capable of anything, of the kind of atrocity dreamed up by such authors to conclude a particularly sensational chapter. And what will the Count do? And what about the young man mentioned first by Cascajares and later by Mudarra in the newspaper serial. What will he do? Who is he? What exactly is the relationship between that unknown gentleman and the Countess? I would love to know . . .

VI

I looked about me on the tram and, O horror, my eyes alighted on someone who made me tremble with fear. While I had been absorbed in reading that interesting fragment of serial, the tram had stopped several times to let off or take on the occasional passenger. One such passenger was the man whose sudden presence had so shaken me. It was him, Mudarra, the butler himself, sitting opposite me, his knees touching mine. In a moment, I had examined him from head to toe and recognized him

Copyrighted Material

from the description I had read. It could be none other; even the most insignificant details of his clothes clearly indicated it was him. I recognized his greasy, swarthy skin; the untamable hair growing in all directions, like the snakes on Medusa's head; the eyes almost concealed by his wild, bushy eyebrows; the pigeon toes; in short, the same look, the same man in appearance, attire, in the way he breathed and coughed, even in the way he put his hand in his pocket to pay his fare.

Then I saw him take out a wallet and noticed that this object bore a large gilt M, the initial of his surname. He opened the wallet, removed a letter and studied the envelope with a demonic smile on his face. I could even imagine him muttering to himself:

'I've got her handwriting right off pat!'

It was, in fact, quite a short letter and the address on the envelope was written in a female hand. He looked at it hard, relishing his villainous handiwork, until he noticed that I, with indiscreet, discourteous curiosity, was peering over to read the address. He shot me a glance that struck me like a blow and immediately returned the letter to his wallet.

During the brief period of time it had taken me to read that fragment of a story, to ponder a little those strange events, and to find the unlikely, fantastical figure of Mudarra himself transformed into a living being and a fellow passenger on that journey, the tram had left behind it Calle de Alcalá, crossed Puerta del Sol and emerged triumphant into Calle Mayor, pushing its way past the other carriages, scattering the slower, loitering carts and frightening the pedestrians who, in the tumult of the street and dazed by the hubbub of noises, often failed to see the great hulk approaching until it was almost upon them.

I was still studying the man as one would an object of whose real existence one is not quite sure, and I did not take my eyes off his repellent features until I saw him stand up, call for the tram to stop and get off, only to disappear at once among the crowds filling the street.

VII

Several people got on and off, and the living décor of the tram changed completely.

Copyrighted Material

I was feeling increasingly curious about an event that, at first sight, could be seen as having been shaped exclusively by my own mind out of the disparate sensations occasioned by that initial conversation and by what I had read subsequently, but which I now imagined to be true and undoubtedly real.

When the man I believed to be the evil butler got off, I sat thinking about the letter and explained it to myself in my own fashion, not wishing, in such a delicate matter, to prove any less fertile in imagination than the novelist and author of the fragment I had read moments before. Mudarra, I thought, eager to avenge himself on the Countess – that poor unlucky Countess! – copies her handwriting and pens a letter to the young gentleman, with whom something may or may not have occurred. In the letter, she invites him to her house; the young man arrives at the appointed hour and, shortly afterwards, so does the husband, duly informed of the meeting, so that he can catch his unfaithful wife in flagrante. Very clever! Now, while such a plan may have its pros and cons in real life, it works perfectly in a novel. The lady faints; the lover panics; the husband commits a terrible act; and behind the curtain lurks the fateful countenance of the butler, revelling in his devilish revenge.

I have read many novels, many of them very bad indeed, and it was I who gave that twist to a story that was silently evolving in my imagination on the flimsy basis of something a friend had told me, a few lines from a novel found on a scrap of newspaper and an encounter on the tram with a complete stranger.

VIII

On and on the tram went, and, whether because of the heat inside or because the slow, monotonous motion of the vehicle produces a kind of dizziness that can all too easily become sleep, the fact is, my eyelids began to droop, and, as I listed slightly to the left, I leaned my elbow on my parcel of books and closed my eyes. However, I continued to see before me the row of faces, male and female, some bearded, others hairless, some laughing, some stiff and solemn. Then, it seemed to me that, as if at the command of a shared muscle, all those faces began to wink and grimace, opening and closing

Copyrighted Material

eyes and mouths and revealing a series of teeth that went from the purest of whites to the yellowest of yellows, some sharp and others blunt or worn. The eight noses that protruded from beneath those sixteen eyes of diverse colours and expression kept growing then shrinking, and constantly changing shape; the mouths opened horizontally, emitting silent guffaws, or else extended outwards to form long snouts, similar to the interesting face of a certain estimable animal whose name is anathema.

Through the window beyond those eight faces, whose horrific visages I have just described, I could see the street, the houses and the passers-by, all moving very fast, as if the tram were travelling at vertiginous speed. To me, at least, it seemed to be going faster than any Spanish or French or English or American train; it was travelling as fast as you can possibly imagine a solid object moving through space.

As my lethargic state grew more pronounced, it seemed to me that the houses and streets and Madrid itself were disappearing. For a moment, I thought the tram was travelling through the depths of the sea; outside, I could see the bodies of vast whales and the sticky tendrils of a multitude of corals of various sizes. Small fish flicked their slippery tails against the glass, and some peered in with large, golden eyes. Unfamiliar crustaceans, large molluscs, madrepores, sponges and hordes of giant, misshapen bivalves, of a kind I had never seen, passed ceaselessly by. The tram was being drawn by some sort of swimming monster, whose oars, pushing against the water, sounded like the beatings of a propeller that made the watery mass churn with its endless turning. This vision gradually faded, and then it seemed to me that the tram was flying through the air, straight as a bullet, unbuffeted by the winds. There was nothing to be seen outside, only empty space; the clouds occasionally wrapped about us; a sudden, violent shower of rain drummed on the upper floor; then we emerged once more into pure, sun-flooded space, only to plunge back into the vaporous bosom of immense cloudscapes – now red, now yellow, now the colour of opals, now of amethysts – which we left behind as we journeyed. At other times, we passed through a place filled by glowing masses of the finest gold dust; at still others, the dust, which I fancied came from the movement of the wheels grinding down the light, was first silver, then green like powdered emeralds, and finally red like powdered rubies. The tram was being drawn now by some apocalyptic winged creature, stronger

Copyrighted Material

than a hippogryph and bolder than a dragon, and the sound of the wheels and the wings was reminiscent of the hum from the great sails of a windmill, or from a bumblebee the size of an elephant. We flew through endless space, never arriving anywhere, and many leagues beneath our feet lay the Earth, and on the Earth was Spain, Madrid, the *barrio* of Salamanca, Señor Cascajares, the Countess, the Count, Mudarra, and the unknown young man.

IX

I soon fell deeply asleep and then the tram stopped moving, stopped flying and I lost the feeling that I was travelling in a tram, and all that remained was the deep, monotonous rumble that never ceases during the nightmares that afflict one, be it in a train or in a cabin on board ship. I fell asleep. O unlucky Countess! I saw her as clearly as the piece of paper on which I am writing now; I saw her sitting at a table, resting her cheek on her hand, looking as sad and meditative as a statue representing melancholy. At her feet, a little dog lay curled, apparently as sad as his interesting mistress.

Then I was able to study at my leisure the woman I considered to be misfortune personified. She was tall and fair, with large, expressive eyes, a slender, almost large, but exquisitely shaped nose that stood out gracefully beneath the curve of her fine, blue-black eyebrows. She was simply coiffed, and, from that and the way she was dressed, it was clear that she did not intend going out that night, that terrible, terrible night! With growing anxiety I watched the lovely face I so longed to know, and it seemed to me that I could read her thoughts on her noble brow, where the habit of mental concentration had traced a few imperceptible lines that time would transform into deep wrinkles.

X

Suddenly the door opened and in walked a man. The Countess gave a cry of surprise and sprang to her feet in a state of great agitation.

Copyrighted Material

'What do you mean by this, Rafael?' she said. 'What impudence! Who let you in?'

'Were you not expecting me, Señora?' said the handsome young man. 'I received a letter from you . . .'

'A letter from me!' the Countess exclaimed, in a state of still greater agitation. 'I wrote no such letter. Why would I?'

'But look, Señora,' said the young man, taking out the letter and showing it to her. 'It's in your own hand.'

'Dear God! What evil scheme is this?' she cried in despair. 'I did not write that letter. This is a trap that has been laid for me . . .'

'Calm down, Señora . . . And please forgive me.'

'Ah, I understand now. That vile man. I can guess what his idea was. You must leave at once. No, it's too late. I can hear my husband's voice.'

Indeed, a booming voice could be heard in the next room, and then the Count entered and, pretending to be surprised to find the young man there, he gave a rather affected laugh and said:

'Why, Rafael, fancy meeting you here. It's been such a long time. You came to keep Antonia company, I suppose. Well, do stay for tea.'

The Countess and her husband exchanged a dark look. In his confusion, the young man could barely manage to return the Count's greeting. I saw various servants come in and out; I saw them bring in the tea and then vanish, leaving the three main characters alone. Something terrible was about to happen.

They sat down. The Countess was as pale as death; the Count affected a wild hilarity, as if he were drunk; and the young man said nothing, answering only in monosyllables. Tea was poured, and the Count handed Rafael a cup, not any cup, but a particular one. The Countess stared at the cup with an expression of all-consuming horror on her face. They drank in silence, accompanying their tea with various tasty Huntley & Palmers biscuits and other titbits appropriate to the occasion. Then the Count gave another of those loud, crazy laughs peculiar to him that night and said:

'Well, this is dull! I can't get a word out of you, Rafael. Antonia, play something. It's been so long since we heard you. How about that piece by Gortzchach entitled 'Death'? You used to play it so well. Come now, take your place at the piano.'

Copyrighted Material

The Countess tried to speak but could not utter a single word. Then her husband fixed her with his eyes, and she gave in, like a dove hypnotized by a boa constrictor. She got up and went over to the piano, and there the Count must have said something that terrified her still more, placing her in his infernal power. The piano spoke, a multitude of strings struck simultaneously; as the Countess's hands raced over the flats and sharps, they awoke in a second the hundreds of notes sleeping silently in the soundboard. At first, the music was a confusion of sounds that deafened rather than pleased, but then the storm abated, and a fearful, funereal song, like the 'Dies irae', emerged from the disorder. I felt I could hear the sad singing of a choir of Carthusian monks, accompanied by the low moans of a bassoon. Then we heard mournful cries, as one imagines the cries of condemned souls in Purgatory to be, pleading incessantly for a forgiveness that will be long in coming.

Then it was back to those drawn-out, raucous arpeggios, notes jostling with each other, as if quarrelling over who should arrive first. The chords rose and fell just as the foam of the waves builds and is lost. The tune ebbed and flowed in an endless swell, dwindling almost to nothing, then returning with more force, forming great, churning eddies.

I was swept away by that powerful, majestic music. The Countess had her back to me and so I could not see her face, but I imagined that, in her present state of bewilderment and fear, the piano must somehow be playing itself.

The young man was behind her, and the Count to her right, leaning on the piano. Occasionally, she glanced up at him, but she presumably found the expression in his eyes so terrifying that she immediately lowered her gaze and continued playing. Suddenly, the piano stopped, and the Countess screamed.

At that moment, I felt a hard blow on my shoulder that shook me violently awake.

XI

In the agitation of my dream, I had slid sideways and fallen on top of the venerable Englishwoman sitting next to me.

Copyrighted Material

'You fell asleep on me!' she said, pulling a sour face and repelling the parcel of books that had fallen into her lap.

'Yes, Señora, you're quite right, I did fall asleep!' I answered, embarrassed to see how all the other passengers were laughing at me.

'I'm going to tell the conductor that you're bothering me. Shocking behaviour in a gentleman,' she added in her fractured Spanish. 'You seem to think that my body is a bed for you to sleep on. You are a stupid ass, sir!'

When she said these words, this daughter of Albion, who was already quite red in the face, turned bright scarlet. It looked as if the blood filling her cheeks and nose was about to burst forth from her glowing pores. She showed me four sharp, very white teeth, as if she were about to bite me. I begged her forgiveness for my discourteous behaviour while asleep, retrieved my parcel and reviewed the new faces in the tram. Imagine my surprise, dear, patient, kindly reader, when I saw before me the young man from my dream, Don Rafael in person. I rubbed my eyes to convince myself I was not still sleeping, but I was definitely awake, as awake as I am now.

It was him, it really was, and he was talking to the man sitting next to him. I pricked up my ears and listened as if my life depended on it.

'But didn't you suspect anything?' the other man was saying.

'Yes, but I said nothing. She seemed half-dead with fear. Her husband ordered her to play the piano and she didn't dare refuse. As usual, she played admirably, and, as I listened, I almost forgot about the dangerous situation we were in. Despite all her efforts to appear calm, there came a point when she could pretend no longer. Her arms grew limp, her fingers slipped from the keys, she threw back her head and cried out. Then her husband unsheathed a dagger and shouted furiously: "Play or I'll kill you!" When I saw this, my blood boiled. I went to throw myself on the wretch, but I had a feeling in my body I can't even describe. It was as if, suddenly, a bonfire had been lit in my stomach; fire was running through my veins; my temples were pounding, and I fell to the floor, unconscious.'

'Had you noticed no effects from the poison before?' asked the other man.

'I'd felt slightly unwell and had some vague suspicion that something was wrong, but that was all. The poison had been carefully prepared, because it took effect slowly and, while it didn't kill me, it left me with a condition that will stay with me for the rest of my life.'

Copyrighted Material

'And after you lost consciousness, what happened then?'

Rafael was about to answer, and I was listening as if his words held a life-or-death secret, when the tram stopped.

'Here we are at the Palacio de los Consejos already. We'd better get off,' said Rafael.

Oh no! They were leaving before I could find out how the story ended.

'Sir, sir, a word!' I said when I saw them getting up.

The young man paused and looked at me.

'What about the Countess? What happened to the Countess?' I asked eagerly.

The only response I received was the laughter of the other passengers. The two young men, who were also laughing, left without a word. The only human creature who retained her sphinx-like serenity during this comical scene was the Englishwoman, who, indignant at my eccentric behaviour, turned to the other passengers and said:

'The man's a lunatic!'

XII

The tram set off again, and I was burning with curiosity to know what had become of the poor Countess. Did her husband kill her? I knew what the wretch's intentions were. Like all cruel souls, he was eager to have his revenge and wanted his wife to stand by helplessly and watch the death agony of that unwary youth, drawn there by the vile trap set by Mudarra.

But how could the lady continue desperately to maintain her calm, when she knew Rafael had drunk the poison? A truly tragic, blood-curdling scene, I thought, more and more convinced of the reality of the event. And people say these things only happen in novels!

As we passed the Palace, the tram stopped again, and a woman carrying a little dog got on. I immediately recognized the dog I had seen curled up at the Countess's feet; it was the same animal, with the same fine white hair and the same black spot on one of its ears. Fate decreed that this woman should then sit down next to me. Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked her:

'Is that pretty little dog yours?'

Copyrighted Material

'Of course. Do you like him?'

I made to stroke one of the intelligent creature's ears, but the dog, misinterpreting this display of affection, barked and jumped onto the Englishwoman's lap, who again showed me her sharp teeth, as if she were about to bite me, exclaiming:

'You are *incorrigible*!'

'And where did you get the dog?' I asked, ignoring the Englishwoman's latest choleric outburst. 'If you don't mind my asking, that is.'

'It belonged to my mistress.'

'And what happened to your mistress?' I asked urgently.

'Oh, did you know her?' replied the woman. 'She was so very kind, wasn't she?'

'Oh, yes, a fine woman. But what exactly happened?'

'So you know about it? You've heard the news?'

'Indeed. I know precisely what happened up until that business with the tea . . . So the lady died, did she?'

'Yes, God rest her.'

'But how? Was she murdered or was it as a consequence of the shock?'

'What do you mean "murdered"? What "shock"?' she said, a mocking look on her face. 'You haven't heard the news, have you? She ate something that night which disagreed with her. She had a funny turn and had to take to her bed, where she remained until morning.'

Huh! I thought. She either knows nothing about the incident with the piano and the poison or else is pretending that she doesn't.

Then I said:

'So it was something she ate, was it?'

'Yes. I said to her that night: "Don't eat the seafood, Señora," but she took no notice.'

'Seafood?' I said incredulously. 'Don't give me that.'

'Don't you believe me?'

'Yes, yes, of course,' I said, pretending that I did. 'And what about the Count?'

'What Count?'

'Her husband, the Countess's husband, the one who took out his dagger while she was playing the piano.'

The woman looked at me for a moment, then laughed in my face.

Copyrighted Material

'You may laugh, but don't think I don't know what really happened. You obviously don't want to give me the true version of events. Well, we'll see about that. This is a criminal case!'

'But you mentioned a Count and a Countess.'

'Wasn't the Countess the owner of the dog and her butler a man called Mudarra?'

The woman again roared with laughter, so loudly this time that I said to myself: 'She must be Mudarra's accomplice and is clearly trying to conceal the truth.'

'You're mad,' she said.

'Oh, yes, the man's a complete lunatic. He nearly suffocated me!' cried the Englishwoman.

'I know everything. Don't try to hide the truth from me. Tell me how the Countess really died.'

'What Countess are you talking about, man?' asked the woman, bursting out laughing again.

'Look, don't think you can fool me with your guffawing,' I replied. 'The Countess was either poisoned or murdered; I'm absolutely sure of it.'

XIII

The tram reached the *barrio* of Pozas, and I the end of my journey. We all got off. The Englishwoman shot me a glance indicating her delight at being free of me at last, and everyone went their separate ways. I followed the woman with the dog, bombarding her with questions, until she reached her house and went in, still laughing at my insistence on poking my nose into other people's lives. Finding myself alone in the street, I remembered the original object of my journey and made my way to the house where I was to deliver the books. I returned them to the person who had lent them to me and then strolled up and down near the church of Buen Suceso, waiting for the tram to return and take me back to the other side of Madrid.

I couldn't stop thinking about the unfortunate Countess and was becoming more and more convinced that the woman I had spoken to on

Copyrighted Material

the tram had wanted to deceive me by hiding the truth about the whole mysterious tragedy.

XIV

It was getting dark when the tram was ready to depart. I climbed on board, and who do you think I saw? The Englishwoman, sitting in the very same seat. When she spotted me and when I again sat down beside her, the expression on her face was indescribable. She once more turned bright scarlet and exclaimed:

'Not you again! I'll have to complain to the conductor.'

So immersed was I in my tangled thoughts that, ignoring what the Englishwoman was saying to me in her laborious, hybrid Spanish, I said:

'There is no doubt in my mind that the Countess was either poisoned or murdered. You have no idea how ruthless that man is.'

The tram moved off, stopping every now and then to pick up passengers. Near the Palacio Real, three people got on and sat down opposite me. One of them was a tall, thin, bony man with very hard eyes and a resonant voice that commanded respect.

They had not been seated ten minutes when the man turned to his companions and said:

'The poor thing! How she cried out in her last moments. The bullet entered above her right clavicle and then penetrated her heart.'

'What?' I exclaimed, addressing myself to them. 'You mean she was shot? Wasn't she stabbed to death?'

The three men stared at me in surprise.

'No, she was shot,' declared the tall, thin, bony man in a rather surly tone of voice.

'And yet that woman claimed she'd died of food poisoning,' I said, feeling more intrigued by the minute. 'Tell me, what happened?'

'What has it got to do with you?' asked the man sourly.

'I'm very keen to know how this terrible tragedy ended. It's like something out of a novel, isn't it?'

Copyrighted Material

'What do you mean, a novel? You're either mad or you're making fun of us.'

'This is no joking matter, sir,' said the tall, thin man.

'Do you think I don't know? I know everything. I was a witness to various scenes from this horrible crime. But you say the Countess died from a bullet wound.'

'For heaven's sake, we weren't talking about a Countess, but about my dog who got shot accidentally while we were out hunting. If you want to joke, then we can meet elsewhere and I'll give you the answer you deserve.'

'I see. Now you want to cover up the truth,' I said, believing that they wanted to put me off the track by making the poor Countess into a dog.

The man was just preparing his riposte, doubtless a more violent one than the situation called for, when the Englishwoman tapped her forehead as if to tell them that I wasn't quite right in the head. They calmed down then and didn't say another word for the rest of the journey, which ended for them in Puerta del Sol. They were probably afraid of me.

XV

I was still totally consumed by this business and quite incapable of quietening my mind, however hard I tried to reason my way through the whole complex matter. Instead, I grew even more confused and was quite unable to get the image of the poor woman out of my head. I seemed to see in every one of the ever-changing faces on the tram some fact that might contribute to explaining the enigma. My brain was horribly overexcited, and that inner turmoil must have shown on my face, because everyone was staring at me as one might stare at some extraordinary sight.

XVI

Another thing occurred to trouble my poor head on that ill-fated journey. As we were travelling along Calle de Alcalá, a man and a woman got on, and the man sat down next to me. He seemed deeply affected by some recent shocking event, and I even thought I saw him raise his

Copyrighted Material

handkerchief to his eyes now and then to dry the invisible tears he was doubtless shedding behind the green lenses of his huge spectacles.

After a while, the man said softly to the woman who appeared to be his wife:

'There are suspicions that she may have been poisoned, you know. Don Mateo just told me. The poor woman!'

'How dreadful! I'd wondered about that myself,' replied his consort. 'But what can you expect from such villains?'

'I swear I'll leave no stone unturned to find out.'

Then I, all ears, said in an equally low voice:

'It's true, sir, there was a poisoning. I know that for a fact.'

'What? You know? You knew her too?' said the man in the green spectacles eagerly, turning to me.

'Yes, she suffered a violent death, of that I am quite sure, however much certain people would like us to believe it was food poisoning.'

'My feelings exactly. She was such an excellent woman too. But how do you know?'

'I just know,' I said, pleased that he didn't take me for a madman.

'Then you must testify in court. They're drawing up the indictment now.'

'I'd be glad to and to see those scoundrels punished. Oh, I'll testify all right.'

My obsession had reached such extremes that I had allowed that event, half-dreamed, half-read-about, to take me over entirely, and I believed it as surely as I believe this is a pen with which I'm writing.

'Indeed, sir, we must clear up this enigma so that the perpetrators of the crime can be punished. I will testify that she was poisoned with a cup of tea, just like the young man.'

'Did you hear that, Petronila?' said the man in the spectacles to his wife. 'A cup of tea!'

'I'm astonished,' answered the lady. 'The lengths these men will go to.'

'Yes, a cup of tea. The Countess was playing the piano . . .'

'What Countess?' asked the man, interrupting me.

'The Countess, the one who was poisoned.'

'We're not talking about a Countess, man!'

'So you're another one determined to cover the whole thing up.'

Copyrighted Material

'No, no. There was no Countess or Duchess involved, but the laundress who lives in the same building as us, the pointsman's wife.'

'A laundress, eh?' I said mischievously. 'So you want me to believe that she was a laundress, do you?'

The man and his wife looked at me mockingly, then mumbled something to each other. From a gesture the woman made, I realized that they were convinced I was drunk. I stoically said nothing more, opting to treat that disrespectful supposition with the silent scorn proper to large souls. My anxiety was growing. The Countess did not leave my thoughts for a second, and I had become as deeply concerned about her sinister end as if the whole affair were not the result of the unhealthy lucubrations of my own imagination, under the influence of successive chance encounters and conversations. In order that you can see to what extremes my madness brought me, I will describe the final incident on that journey and the extravagant way in which I brought to a close that painful struggle with my reason, embroiled as it was in that battle of shadows.

XVII

The tram was just entering Calle de Serrano, when I looked out through the window ahead of me at the dimly lit street. I saw a man walking past and I cried out in surprise and shouted wildly:

'There he is, there is cruel Mudarra himself, the perpetrator of all those crimes!'

I told the tram to stop and scrambled to the door, stumbling over the feet and legs of the other passengers. Once in the street, I ran after the man, yelling:

'Stop that man! He's a murderer!'

You can imagine the effect of these cries in that peaceful area of Madrid.

Passers-by detained the man – the very man I had seen earlier in the tram – while I bawled:

'He's the one who prepared the poison for the Countess, the one who killed the Countess!'

There was a moment of indescribable confusion. He said I was mad,

Copyrighted Material

and, of course, we were both immediately marched off to the police station. I have no recollection of what happened after that. I cannot remember what I did that night in the place where they locked me up. My most vivid recollection after these strange events is of waking from the deep lethargy into which I fell, a drunkenness of the mind produced by what exactly I really don't know, by one of those passing episodes of mental derangement of such interest to scientists as the precursors of hopeless insanity.

As you can imagine, nothing came of the matter, for the unpleasant fellow I had named Mudarra was, in fact, an honest grocer who had never poisoned a single Countess in his life. And yet, for a long time afterwards, I persisted in my delusion and would cry out:

'Poor unfortunate Countess! Whatever the others may say, I still stick to my guns. No one will persuade me that you did not end your days at the hands of your enraged husband.'

XVIII

It has taken some months for these ghosts to return to the mysterious place whence they arose to drive me to the brink of insanity, and for reality to re-establish itself in my mind again. I laugh now when I think of that tram ride, and the concern I once felt for that imagined victim and which I now devote – would you believe it? – to my companion on that distressing journey, the irascible Englishwoman, whose foot I dislocated when I was rushing to get off the tram in pursuit of the supposed butler.

Madrid, November 1871

Copyrighted Material

EMILIA PARDO BAZÁN

The Talisman

This story, although true, should not be read by the light of day. I'm telling you this now, dear reader, so don't say I didn't warn you: you will need some light, but avoid electricity or gas or even oil, and use instead one of those charming, elegant candelabra made to hold three candles, and which barely shed any light at all, leaving most of the room in darkness. Or, better still, go out into the garden and sit by the pond, where the magnolias give off their intoxicating perfume and the silvery moon shimmers and glows, and there listen to this tale of the mandrake and Baron de Helynagy.

I met this foreign gentleman in the simplest, least novelistic way possible: I was introduced to him at one of the many parties held by the Austrian ambassador. The Baron was first secretary at the embassy, but neither the post he occupied, nor his appearance, nor his conversation – which was much like that of most people one meets at such parties – justified the mysterious, insinuating tone of the person who introduced us, the tone one might use to announce some significant event.

My curiosity was aroused, and so I decided to observe the Baron more closely. He seemed a very refined fellow, in the rather starchy manner of the diplomat, and handsome too, with the somewhat impersonal good

---

Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851–1921) was born in A Coruña in Galicia, and many of her novels are set in that region. She married at sixteen and moved with her husband to Madrid, where she lived until her death. She was a prolific writer and is often credited with introducing Naturalism into Spanish literature. Her most famous work is *Los Pazos de Ulloa* (*The House of Ulloa*). She and Galdós became lovers for a time, and remained friends throughout their lives. She took a keen interest in politics and played an important role in the development of the feminist movement in Spain.

Copyrighted Material

looks of all society men, groomed to perfection by his manservant, his tailor and his barber – and thanks above all to starch, for everything about him was starched. As for the Baron's moral and intellectual qualities, it was hard to make an assessment in such mundane circumstances. After half an hour of talk, I again thought to myself: I really can't see why they make such a fuss about the man.

As soon as my conversation with the Baron was over, I questioned various people about him, and what I learned only increased my initial curiosity. They told me that the Baron was in possession of a talisman. Yes, a real talisman, something which, like Balzac's *peau de chagrin*, allowed his every wish to be granted and guaranteed him success in all his enterprises. I was told of strokes of luck that could only be explained by the magical influence of that talisman. The Baron was Hungarian, and although he claimed to be descended from the glorious Magyar prince, Taksony, he was, in fact, the last remaining member of the Helynagy family and had been living in poverty, never leaving his ancient ancestral abode in the mountains. Suddenly, a series of strange coincidences placed in his hands a sizeable fortune: not only did various rich relatives die rather opportunely, with him as their sole heir, but when undertaking restoration work on the ancient Helynagy castle, he also happened upon a hoard of money and jewellery. As befitted a man of his rank, the Baron then presented himself at the court of Vienna, and his extraordinary luck thereafter could only be explained by some mysterious protective power. If he gambled, you could be sure that he would win all bets. He was involved in three duels, and in all three he wounded his opponent; his last opponent's wound proved fatal, which seemed like a warning from fate to anyone tempted to take on the Baron in future. When the Baron fancied a career in politics, the doors of parliament opened wide, and his post at the embassy in Madrid was only a first step on the ladder to a higher position. It was already rumoured that next winter he would be appointed Minister plenipotentiary.

If this was not all just some tall tale, it would certainly be worth finding out precisely what kind of talisman could achieve such enviable results, and that is precisely what I decided to do, because I have always believed that one should, on principle, believe in the fantastic and the miraculous, and anyone who doesn't – at least between the hours of eleven at night

Copyrighted Material

and five in the morning – is clearly sixpence short of a shilling, which is to say, a downright fool.

In order to achieve my goal, I chose a very different tack to the one most people might take: I went out of my way to engage the Baron in conversation, but never said a word about the talisman. For a while, though, my strategy produced no results whatsoever; the Baron never once confided in me, and, far from the smug glee of someone certain of his luck, what I sensed in him was sadness and disquiet, a kind of dark pessimism. On the other hand, his repeated allusions to earlier days, to more modest, obscure times, and to his sudden rise to the top thanks to a dizzyingly fortunate stroke of luck, confirmed the version doing the rounds. The announcement that the Baron had been summoned to Vienna and that his departure was imminent made me lose all hope of learning more.

I was thinking precisely this on an afternoon when the Baron arrived unexpectedly at my house. He had presumably come to say goodbye and was carrying an object that he placed on the nearest table before sitting down and looking nervously around, as if to make sure we were quite alone. I felt a rush of excitement because I immediately guessed, with quick, feminine intuition, that he was about to tell me about the talisman.

'I have come here to ask you an enormous favour,' he said. 'As you know, I have been called home, and I suspect that the visit will be rather brief and rushed. I possess an object . . . a kind of relic . . . and I fear the vicissitudes of the journey. In fact, I'm afraid someone might steal it, because it is a widely coveted thing to which ordinary people attribute amazing powers. News of my journey has already spread, and it's highly likely that some plot is afoot to take the object from me. I am entrusting it to you, and, if you could keep it safe until my return, I will be forever in your debt.'

So that precious talisman, that rare amulet, was there on the table, just a few steps away, and it was going to be left in my hands!

'Rest assured,' I said earnestly, 'if I do keep it, it will be perfectly safe, but, before I agree to do so, I would like you to tell me exactly what the object is. I've never asked you any indiscreet questions, but I know what other people say, and I understand that, according to rumour, you possess an amazing talisman, which has brought you all kinds of good fortune. I

Copyrighted Material