The Novel on the Tram

by Benito Pérez Galdós

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The Novel on the Tram

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920)

This translation of La novela en el tranvía, which I have entitled The Novel on the Tram, is granted to the public domain by its translator, Michael Wooff.

I

The tram left the end of the Salamanca district to pass through the whole of Madrid in the direction of Pozas. Motivated by a selfish desire to sit down before others with the same intention, I put my hand on the handrail of the stair leading to the upper deck, stepped onto the platform and went up. At the same time (a fateful meeting!) I collided with another passenger who was getting on the tram from the other side. I looked at him and recognized my friend Don Dionisio Cascajares y de la Vallina, a man as inoffensive as he was discreet, who had at this critical juncture the goodness to greet me with a warm and enthusiastic handshake. The shock of our unexpected meeting did not have serious consequences apart from the partial denting of a certain straw hat placed on top of the head of an English woman who was trying to get on behind my friend, and who suffered, no doubt for lack of agility, a glancing blow from his stick. We sat down without attaching exaggerated importance to this slight mishap and started to chat.

Don Dionisio Cascajares is a famous doctor, although not for the depth of his knowledge of pathology, and a good man, since it could never be said of him that he was inclined to take what did not belong to him, nor to kill his fellow men by means other than those of his dangerous and scientific vocation. We can be quite sure that the leniency of his treatment and his complacency in not giving his patients any other treatment than the one they want are the root cause of the confidence he inspires in a great many families, irrespective of class, especially when, in his limitless kindness, he also has a reputation for meting out services over and above the call of duty though always of a rigorously honest nature. Nobody knows like he does interesting events which are not common knowledge, and no-one possesses to a higher degree the mania of asking questions, though this vice of being overly inquisitive is compensated for in him by the promptness with which he tells you everything he knows without others needing to take the trouble to sound him out. Judge then if such a fine exemplar of human flippancy would be in demand with the

curious and the garrulous. This man, my friend as he is everyone's, was sitting next to me when the tram, slipping smoothly along its iron road, was going down the calle de Serrano, stopping from time to time in order to fill the few seats that still remained empty. We were so hemmed in that the bundle of books I was carrying with me became a source of great concern to me, and I was putting it first on one knee, then on the other. Finally I decided to sit on it, fearing to disturb the English lady, whose seat just happened to be next to me on my left.

"And where are you going?" Cascajares asked me, looking at me over the top of his dark glasses, which made me feel that I was being watched by four eyes rather than two. I answered him evasively and he, not wanting to lose any time before finding something out, insisted on asking questions: "And what's so-and-so up to? And that woman, what's-her-name, where is she?" accompanied by other inquiries of the same ilk which were not fully replied to either. As a last resort, seeing how useless his attempts were to start a conversation, he set off on a path more in keeping with his expansive temperament and began to spill the beans:

"Poor countess!" he said, expressing with a movement of his head and facial features his disinterested compassion. "If she had followed my advice, she would not be in such a critical situation."

"Quite clearly," I replied mechanically, doing compassionate homage also to the aforementioned countess. "Just imagine," he continued, "that they've let themselves be dominated by that man! And that man will end up being master of the house. Poor woman! She thinks that with tears and lamentations all can be remedied, but it isn't so. She must make a decision, for that man is a monster; I believe he has it in him to commit the most heinous crimes."

"Yes, he'll stop at nothing," I said, unconsciously participating in his indignation.

"He's like all those low-born men who follow their base instincts. If they raise their station in life, they become insufferable. His face is a clear indication that nothing

good can come out of all this."

"It hits you in the face. I believe you."

"I'll explain it to you in a nutshell. The countess is an excellent woman, angelic, as discreet as she is beautiful and deserving of something far better. But she is married to a man who does not understand the value of the treasure he possesses and he spends his life given over to gambling and to all sorts of illicit pastimes. She in the meantime gets bored and cries. Is it surprising that she tries to dull her pain honestly, here and there, wherever a piano is being played? Moreover I myself give her this advice and say it loud and clear: Madam, seek diversion. Life's too short. The count in the end will have to repent of his follies and your sufferings will then be over. It seems to me I'm right."

"No doubt about it," I replied off the cuff, although, in my heart of hearts, as indifferent as I had been to begin with to the sundry misfortunes of the countess. "But that's not the worst of it," Cascajares added, striking the floor with his stick, "for now the count, in the prime of life, has started to be jealous, yes, of a certain young man who has taken to heart the enterprise of helping the countess to enjoy herself."

"The husband will be to blame if he succeeds."

"None of that would matter as the countess is virtue incarnate; none of that would matter, I say, if there was not a terrible man whom I suspect of being about to cause a disaster in that house."

"Really? And who is he, this man?" I asked with a spark of curiosity.

"A former butler, well-liked by the count, who has set himself to make a martyr of the countess as unhappy as she is sensitive. It seems that he is now in possession of a certain secret which could compromise her, and with this weapon he presumes to do God knows what. It's infamous!"

"It certainly is and he merits an exemplary punishment," I said, discharging in turn

the weight of my wrath on that man.

"But she is innocent, she is an angel. But enough said! We've reached Cibeles. Yes, on the right I can see Buenavista Park. Have them stop, boy. I'm not one of those who jump off while the tram is still moving to split open their heads on the cobbles. Farewell, my friend, farewell."

The tram stopped and Don Dionisio Cascajares y de la Vallina got off after shaking my hand again and inflicting more slight damage on the hat of the English lady who had not yet recovered from her original scare.

II

The tram carried on and, strange to relate, I in turn continued to think about the unknown countess, of her cruel and suspicious consort and above all of the sinister man who, according to the doctor's emphatic expression, was on the point of causing a disaster in the house. Consider, reader, the nature of human thought: when Cascajares started to relate those events to me, I was annoyed at his importunity and heaviness, but my mind wasted little time in taking hold of that same subject, turning it upside down and right side up, a psychological process which did not cease to be stimulated by the regular motion of the tram and the dull and monotonous noise of its wheels polishing the iron of the rails.

But in the end I stopped thinking about what was of such little interest to me and, scanning with my eyes the inside of the tram, I examined one by one my travelling companions. What distinctive faces and what expressions! Some appeared not to be bothered in the least about those who were next to them. Some were happy, some were sad, this one was yawning, that one was laughing, and in spite of the journey's shortness, there was not a single one who did not want it to be over quickly, for among the thousand and one annoyances of our existence, none exceeds the one that consists in being a dozen people gazing at one another's faces without saying a word and mutually musing over their wrinkles, their moles or some anomaly noticed in a

face or in clothing.

It is strange this short acquaintance with people that we have not seen before and will in all likelihood not see again. We already meet someone on entering and others arrive while we're still there. Passengers get off leaving us alone and finally we too alight. It's a mirror of human life itself in which birth and death are like the entrances and exits I've just mentioned for new generations of passengers come to populate the little world that lives inside the tram. They get on, they get off; they are born and they die. How many have passed through here before we have! How many more will succeed us! And for the resemblance to be even more complete there is also a small world of passions in miniature inside that big box.

Many go there that we feel instinctively to be excellent people and their appearance pleases us and we are even upset to see them go. Others, on the contrary, annoy us as soon as we look at them. We examine with a certain rancour their phrenological characteristics and feel a real pleasure when we see them go. And meanwhile the vehicle, an imitation of life, keeps going, always receiving and letting go, uniform, indefatigable, majestic, oblivious to what is happening inside it, without being moved very much by the barely stifled passions of dumb show. The tram is running, always running over the two interminable iron tracks, wide and slippery as centuries. I was thinking about this while the tram was going up the calle de Alcalá until the noise of my bundle of books falling on the floor pulled me back from the gulf of so many mixed up ruminations. I picked it up immediately and my eyes focused on the sheet of newspaper that was serving as a wrapper to the volumes and mechanically took in half a line of what was printed there. All of a sudden my curiosity was well and truly aroused. I had read something that interested me and certain names scattered through that scrap of a newspaper serial affected both my vision and my memory. I looked for the beginning and did not find it: the paper was torn and I could only read, with curiosity at first and afterwards more and more eagerly, what follows:

The countess felt indescribably agitated. The presence of Mudarra, the insolent butler, who had forgotten his humble beginnings to dare to cast his gaze on such a noble personage, was a continual source of anxiety to her. The scoundrel never stopped spying on her, watching her as a prison guard watches a prisoner. He already showed no deference to her and nor were the sensitivity and delicacy of such an excellent lady an obstacle to his entrapment of her. Mudarra made an untimely entrance into the private quarters of the countess, who, pale and agitated, feeling at one and the same time both shame and terror, did not have the strength to dismiss him.

"Don't be frightened, Your Ladyship," he said with a forced and sinister smile, which made the lady even more alarmed. "I haven't come to do you any harm."

"Oh my God! When will this agony be over?" the lady exclaimed, dropping her arms in discouragement. "Leave. I cannot accede to your desires. What infamy! To make use in this way of my weakness and the indifference of my husband, the source of so many of my misfortunes!"

"Why so surly, countess?" the fierce butler added. "If I did not have in my hands the secret that could lead to your perdition, if I could not apprise the count of certain particulars with reference to that young nobleman. But I will not use these terrible weapons against you. One day you will understand me and know how selfless is the great love that you have been able to inspire in me."

As he said this Mudarra moved a few steps nearer to the countess who distanced herself with horror and repugnance from that monster. Mudarra was a man of around fifty, dark-skinned, thickset and knock-kneed, with rough, untidy hair and a big mouth full of teeth. His eyes, half hidden behind the luxuriant growth of wide, black and very thick eyebrows, expressed at moments like these the most bestial concupiscence.

"Ah porcupine!" he angrily exclaimed on seeing the lady's natural reticence. "How

unfortunate I am not to be a dapper young chap! Such prudery knowing full well I can tell the count and have no doubt that he'll believe me, Your Ladyship: the count has so much trust in me that he takes what I say as gospel and he'll be full of jealousy if I show him the paper."

"Scoundrel!" shouted the countess with a noble display of righteous indignation. "I am innocent and my husband will not give credence to such vile slanders. And even if I were guilty I would prefer a thousand times over for my husband and the whole world to despise me than to buy peace of mind at that price. Leave here at once."

"I too have a temper, countess," said the butler swallowing his rage. "I too can lose it and get angry and since Your Ladyship is making a big thing of this, let's make a big thing of it. I already know what I have to do and I've been until now far too affable. One last time I put it to Your Ladyship that we should be friends and don't make me do something you'll regret, and so my lady."

On saying this Mudarra contracted the parchment-like skin and the rigid tendons of his face making a grimace like a smile and took a few more steps as if to sit down on the sofa next to the countess. The latter jumped up shouting: "No! Leave! Scoundrel! And not to have anyone here to defend me. Leave!"

The butler then was like a wild animal that lets go of the prey it was holding a moment before in its claws. He breathed heavily, made a threatening gesture and slowly left with soft footfalls. The countess, trembling and out of breath, having taken refuge in a corner of the room, heard the footfalls which faded away on the carpet of the room next door and finally breathed when she judged him to be far away. She closed the doors and tried to sleep, but sleep eluded her, her eyes still full of terror at the image of the monster.

CHAPTER XI The Plot

Mudarra, on leaving the countess's room, went in the direction of his own and, dominated by a strong feeling of nervous anxiety, started to search for letters and

papers muttering to himself: "I can't stand it anymore. You'll pay me back for all of this." Then he sat down, took up his pen, and, putting in front of him one of those letters and examining it closely, he began to write another, trying to copy the writing. He moved his eyes feverishly from the model to the copy and finally, after a great deal of work, he wrote with writing totally identical to that of the model, the following letter, the sentiments in which were of his own making: I promised to meet with you and I'm hastening to carry out that promise.

The newspaper in which this serial appeared was torn and I could read no further.

III

Without taking my eyes off the bundle of books I started to think about the relationship between the news I had had from the mouth of Don Cascajares and the scene I had just read in that scandal sheet, a roman feuilleton no doubt translated from some silly novel by Ponson du Terrail or Montépin. It may be silly I said to myself, but the fact is I'm interested in this countess who has fallen victim to the nastiness of an insufferable butler who only exists in the disturbed mind of some novelist born to terrify simple souls. And what will he do to take his revenge? He'd be capable of framing some atrocity to bring to an end in sensational style such a chapter. And what will the count do? And that young man Cascajares mentioned on the tram and Mudarra in the serial, what will he do? Who is he? What is there between the countess and that unknown gentleman? I'd give my eye teeth to know.

These were my thoughts when I raised my eyes and looked over the inside of the tram with them. To my horror I saw a person who made me shake with fear. While I was engrossed in the interesting reading of the feuilleton, the tram had stopped several times to take on or let off passengers. On one of these occasions this man had got on whose sudden presence now produced such a strong impression on me. It was him, Mudarra, the butler in person, sitting opposite me, with his knees touching my knees. I took a second to examine him from head to toe and saw in him the

features I had already read about. He could be no-one else: even the most trifling details of his clothing clearly indicated it was him. I recognized his dark and lustrous complexion, his unruly hair, the curls of which sprang up in opposite directions like the snakes of Medusa. His deep-sunk eyes were covered by the thickness of his bushy eyebrows and his beard was no less unkempt than his hair, while his feet were twisted inwards like those of parrots. The same look in a nutshell, the same man in his appearance, in his clothes, in the way he breathed and in the way he coughed, even in the way he put his hand into his pocket to pay his fare.

Suddenly I saw him take out a letter writing case and I noticed that this object had on its cover a great gilded M, the first letter of his surname. He opened it, took out a letter and looked at the envelope with a demonic smile and I even thought I heard him mutter: "How well I've imitated the handwriting!" The letter was indeed a small one with the envelope addressed in a feminine scrawl. I watched him closely as he took pleasure in his infamous action until he saw that I had indiscreetly and discourteously stretched my face in order to read the address. He gave me a stare that hit me like a blow and put the letter back in the case.

The tram kept going and in the short time it had taken me to read an extract from the novel, to reflect on such strange occurrences and to see Mudarra in the flesh, a character out of a book, hard to believe in, made human and now my companion on this journey, we had left behind the calle de Alcalá, were currently crossing the Puerta del Sol and making a triumphal entrance into the calle Mayor, making a way for ourselves between other vehicles, making slow-moving covered waggons speed up and frightening pedestrians who, in the tumult of the street and dazed by so many diverse noises, only saw the solid outline of the tram when it was almost on top of them. I continued to look at that man as one looks at an object of whose existence one is uncertain and I did not take my eyes from his repugnant face till I saw him get up, ask for the tram to stop and get off, losing sight of him then among the crowd on the street.

Various passengers got off and got on and the living décor of the tram changed completely. The more I thought of it, the more alive was the curiosity that event aroused in me, which I had to begin with considered as forced into my head exclusively by the juxtaposition of various feelings occasioned by my erstwhile conversation and subsequent reading, but which I finally imagined as indubitably true.

When the man in whom I thought to see the awful butler got off the tram, I was still thinking about the incident with the letter and I explained it to myself as best I could, hoping not to have on such a delicate matter an imagination less fertile than the novelist who had written what only moments before I had read. Mudarra, I thought, desirous of taking his revenge on the countess, that unfortunate lady, had copied her writing and written a letter to a certain gentleman of her acquaintance. In the letter she had given him a rendezvous in her own home. The young man had arrived at the time indicated and shortly afterwards the husband, whom the butler had warned so that he would catch his unfaithful wife in flagrante which was in itself an admirable idea! An action, which in life has points for and against, fits snugly in a novel like a ring on a finger. The lady would faint, the lover would panic and the husband would commit an atrocity and, lurking behind a curtain, the face of the butler would light up diabolically.

As an avid reader of numerous bad novels, I gave that twist to what was unconsciously developing in my imagination on the basis of the words of a friend, the reading of a piece of torn-off paper and the sight of someone I had never laid eyes on before.

IV

The tram kept on going and going and whether because of the heat that could be felt inside it or the slow and monotonous movement of the vehicle that gives rise to a certain amount of dizziness which then turns into sleep, what is certain is that I felt

my eyelids droop, leaned to my left-hand side, placing my elbow on the bundle of books, and closed my eyes. While in this position I continued to see the row of faces of both sexes in front of me, some bearded, some shaven, some laughing, some very stiff and serious. Afterwards it seemed to me that, obeying the contraction of a single muscle, all those faces winked and grimaced, opening and closing their eyes and their mouths, and showing me in turn a series of teeth that varied from whiter than white to yellowish, some as sharp as knives, others broken and worn. Those eight noses set under sixteen eyes varying in colour and expression, got bigger or smaller and changed shape; the mouths opened in a horizontal line producing silent laughter or stretched forward forming sharp-pointed snouts similar to the interesting face of a certain distinguished animal which has brought down on itself the anathema of being unnameable.

Behind those eight faces, whose horrendous traits I have just depicted, and through the windows of the tram, I could see the street, the houses and the passers-by, all speeding past as if the tram were travelling at a vertiginous speed. I at least thought that it went faster than the trains on our railroads, faster than its French, English and North American counterparts. It ran as fast as might be imagined when it came to displacing solid objects.

As this state of lethargy increased, I was able to imagine that houses, streets and the whole of Madrid were gradually disappearing. For a moment I thought that the tram was running through oceanic depths: through the windows could be seen the bodies of enormous cetaceans and the sticky appendages of a multitude of polyps of various sizes. Small fish were shaking their slippery tails against the glass and some of them were looking inside with great and gilded eyes. Crustaceans of an unfamiliar shape, large molluscs, madrepores, sponges and a scattering of big and misshapen bivalves which I had never seen before, swam ceaselessly past. The tram was being pulled by monstrous swimming creatures, whose oars, fighting with the water, sounded like the blades of a propeller churning it up with their ceaseless rotation.

This vision started to fade. Then it seemed to me that the tram was flying through the air, always in the same direction and without being blown off course by winds. Through the windows only empty space was visible. Clouds sometimes enveloped us and a sudden downpour drummed against the upper deck. All at once we came out into pure space flooded with sunshine, only to go back to the nebulous presence of huge flashes, now red, now yellow, sometimes opal, sometimes amethyst, which were being left behind us as we made our way forward. We passed then through a point in space where shining forms floated in a very fine golden dust: further on this dust storm, which I took to be produced by the movement of the wheels grinding the light, was silver, then green like flour made from emeralds, and finally red like flour made from rubies. The tram was being dragged by some apocalyptic bird, stronger than a hippogryph and more daring than a dragon, and the noise of the wheels and the driving force made me think of the whirring of the great sails of a windmill, or rather the buzz of a bumblebee the size of an elephant. We were flying through infinite space without ever arriving anywhere. In the meantime the earth fell away several leagues below our feet, and the things of earth—Spain, Madrid, the Salamanca district, Cascajares, the Countess, the Count, Mudarra, the gallant young man, all of them together.

I soon fell into a deep sleep and then the tram stopped moving, stopped flying and the sensation that I felt of travelling in such a tram disappeared and all that was left was the deep and monotonous bass of the wheels which never abandons us even in our nightmares, be it in a train or in the cabin of a steamship. I slept. Oh unhappy countess! I saw her as clearly as I now see the paper that I'm writing on. I saw her sat next to a night light, hand on cheek, sad and pensive like a statue depicting Melancholy. At her feet a lapdog lay curled up that seemed to me just as sad as his as his interesting mistress.

Then I was able to examine at my leisure the woman I had come to see as misfortune personified. She was tall and fair with big and expressive eyes, an

aquiline nose that was actually quite prominent, though not out of proportion to the rest of her face, and set off by the twin curves of her fine and arched eyebrows. She was casually groomed and from this, as from her dress, it was possible to surmise that she did not intend to go out again that night. A night of marvels truly! I observed with increasing anxiety the beautiful form I so much wanted to know better and it seemed to me that I could read her mind behind that noble brow in which the habit of reflexion had traced scarcely visible lines which would soon become wrinkles. Suddenly the door to her room opened to let a man in. The Countess gave a yelp of surprise and got up in a state of great agitation.

"What's this?" she said. "Rafael. You. What barefaced cheek! How did you get in?"

"Madam," answered the one who had just entered, a young man of noble bearing. "Weren't you expecting me? I received a letter from you."

"A letter from me!" exclaimed the Countess even more agitated. "I wrote no such letter. And what reason would I have for writing it?"

"Madam, look," the young man responded, taking out the letter and showing it to her. "It's in your own handwriting."

"Good God! What devilry is this?" said the lady in despair. "It was not I who wrote this letter. They're setting a trap for me."

"Madam, calm down. I'm very sorry."

"Yes. I understand everything now. That infamous man. I have a strong suspicion as to what he had in mind. Leave this instant. But it's already too late. I can already hear my husband's voice."

Indeed a deafening voice could be heard in the room next door and, after a short interval, the Count came in the room. He feigned surprise at seeing the gallant visitor and, subsequently laughing somewhat affectedly, spoke to him:

"Ah Rafael! You're here. Long time no see! You came to accompany Antonia on the

piano. You'll take tea with us."

The Countess and her spouse exchanged a meaningful glance. The young man in his perplexity hardly managed to return the Count's greeting. I saw them entering the living room and servants coming out to meet them. I saw that the servants were carrying tea things and afterwards they disappeared, leaving the three main characters alone.

Something terrible was going to happen.

They sat down. The Countess looked mortified. The Count affected a dazed hilarity like drunkenness and the young man spoke only in monosyllables. Tea was served and the Count passed to Rafael one of the cups, not just any cup, but one he'd singled out. The Countess looked at that cup so fearfully it seemed that her soul had left her body. They drank in silence ballasting the brew with a tasty assortment of Huntley and Palmers biscuits and other nibbles appropriate to this type of supper. Then the Count burst out laughing again with the outrageous and noisy demonstrativeness that was peculiar to him that night, and said:

"How bored we all are! You, Rafael, haven't said a word. Antonia, play something. We haven't heard you play for such a long time. This piece by Gorschack, for instance, entitled Death. You used to play it wonderfully. Come on. Sit down at the piano."

The Countess tried to speak, but could not say a word. The Count looked at her in such a way that the unhappy woman quailed before the terrible expression in his eyes like a dove hypnotized by a boa constrictor. She got up to go to the piano and again there the husband must have said something that terrified her even more, subjecting her to his devilish dominion. The piano sounded with several strings struck at once and, running from the low notes to the high notes, the lady's hands awoke in a second hundreds of sounds that were lying dormant in among the strings and hammers. At first the music was a confused mixture of sounds that stunned

rather than pleased, but then that storm blew over and a funereal and timorous dirge like the Dies irae came out of such disorder. It seemed to me I heard the sad sound of a choir of Carthusians accompanied by the hoarse bellow of the bassoons. After could be heard pitiful sighs like those that we imagine souls exhale, condemned in purgatory to ceaselessly beg for a pardon that is a long time in coming.

Then came loud and extended arpeggios and the notes reared up as if arguing about which of them would could there first. Chords came together and broke up like the foam on waves which forms and is then effaced. The harmonies boiled and fluctuated in an endless heavy swell, fading into silence and then coming back more strongly in great and hasty eddies. I carried on entranced by the majestic and impressive music. I could not see the face of the countess, sat with her back to me, but I imagined it to be in such a state of bewilderment and fright that I started to think that the piano was playing itself. The young man was behind her, the count to her right, leaning on the piano. From time to time she raised her eyes to look at him, but she must have seen something dreadful in the eyes of her companion as she went back to lowering hers and kept on playing. Suddenly the piano stopped sounding and the Countess cried out.

Just at that moment I felt an extremely strong blow to my shoulder, shook myself violently and woke up.

V

In my agitated dream I had changed position and had allowed myself to fall on the venerable English lady who was travelling next to me. "Aah! You—sleeping—disturb me," she said, making a sour face, while she pushed away from her my bundle of books which had fallen onto her knees.

"Madam, it's true. I fell asleep," I replied, embarrassed to see that all the passengers were laughing at this scene.

"Oh! I tell driver—you disturb me—very shocking," the English woman added in

her incomprehensible gibberish: "Oh! You think my body is your bed for you to sleep. Oh! Gentleman, you are a stupid ass."

On saying this, this daughter of Britannia, who already had a ruddy complexion, blushed red as a tomato. You might have thought that the blood that had rushed to her cheeks and her nose was flowing from her incandescent pores. She showed me four sharp and very white teeth as if she wanted to bite me. I asked of her a thousand pardons for the discourtesy of falling asleep, picked up my bundle and reviewed the new faces that there now were in the tram.

Imagine, oh calm and kind reader, when I saw facing me—guess who? the young man I had just finished dreaming about, Don Rafael in the flesh. I rubbed my eyes to convince myself that I was not still asleep and found myself awake, as awake as I am now. He it was and he was talking to someone else who was travelling with him. I paid attention and listened as hard as I could:

"But didn't you suspect anything?" the other person said to him.

"Something, yes. But I held my tongue. She looked petrified with terror. Her husband ordered her to play the piano and she did not dare to resist. She played, as always, admirably, and, as I listened to her, I managed to forget the dangerous situation in which we found ourselves. Despite the efforts she was making to look calm, a moment came when she was no longer able to pretend any more. Her arms relaxed and slipped off the keys. She threw her head back and cried out. Then her husband took out a dagger and, taking a step towards her, shouted furiously: "Play or I'll kill you this instant." When I saw this my blood boiled. I wanted to throw myself at that wretch, but I felt in my body a sensation that I cannot describe to you. A furnace had lit up in my stomach. Fire was running through my veins. My lungs were hyperventilating and I fell on the floor senseless."

"And before that did you not recognize the symptoms of poisoning?" asked the other. "I noticed a certain feeling of uneasiness and had a vague suspicion, but

nothing more than that. The poison had been well prepared. It had a delayed effect on me and did not kill me, though it's left me with a physical impairment for life."

"And after you passed out, what happened?"

Rafael was going to answer and I was hanging on his every word as if it were a matter of life and death when the tram halted.

"Ah, here we are already at Consejos. Let's get off here," said Rafael.

What a nuisance! They were getting off and I would not know how the story ended.

"Sir, sir, a word," I said on seeing them get off. The young man stopped and looked at me.

"And the Countess? What became of her?" I asked eagerly.

Loud laughter was my only response. The two young men laughed too and left without saying a word. The only living being to keep her sphinx-like calm at such a comic scene was the English woman who, indignant at my outlandish behaviour, turned to the other passengers saying: "Oh! A lunatic fellow!"

VI

The tram continued on its way and I was burning with curiosity to know what had happened to the unfortunate Countess. Had her husband killed her? I understood how that villain's mind worked. Desirous of enjoying his revenge, like all cruel souls, he wanted his wife to be present, without pause in playing, at the death of that unwary young man brought there by a spiteful trick on the part of Mudarra. But the lady could not continue making desperate efforts to keep calm, knowing that Rafael had swallowed the poison. A tragic and horrifying scene I thought, more convinced than ever of the reality of that event—and now you'll say that such things only happen in novels!

On passing in front of Palacio the tram halted and a woman got on who was carrying a small dog in her arms. I immediately recognized the dog I had seen reclining at the

feet of the Countess. This was the same dog with the same white and fine fur, the same black patch on one of his ears. As luck would have it the woman sat down next to me. Unable to resist being curious, I put the following question to her:

"Is this nice dog your dog?"

"Who else could he belong to? Do you like him?"

I fondled one of the ears of the intelligent animal to show him affection, but he, oblivious to my blandishments, jumped and put his paws on the knees of the English woman, who showed me her two teeth again as if wanting to bite me, and exclaimed:

"Oh! You are unsupportable!"

"And where did you acquire this dog?" I asked without taking notice of the latest explosion of righteous indignation on the part of the British lady. "Can you tell me?"

"My mistress gave it me."

"And what became of your mistress?" I asked most anxiously.

"Ah! Did you know her?" the woman replied.

"She was a good woman, wasn't she?"

"An excellent woman. But may I know how that bad business ended?"

"So you know about it, you've had news of it."

"Yes, madam. I know what happened, including the tea that was served. And tell me—did your mistress die?"

"Yes, sir. She's gone to a better place."

"And what happened? Was she murdered or did she die of fright?"

"What murder? What fright?" she said with a mocking expression. "You're not in the know after all. She ate something that disagreed with her that night and it harmed her. She had a fainting fit that lasted till dawn."

This one, I thought, knows nothing about the incident with the piano and the poison or doesn't want to make me think she does. Afterwards I said in a loud voice:

"So she died of food poisoning?"

"Yes, sir. I warned her not to eat those shellfish, but she took no notice of me."

"Shellfish, eh?" I said incredulously. "I know what really happened."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Yes. Yes," I replied, pretending to believe her. "And what about the Count, her husband, the one who pulled the dagger on her while she was playing the piano?"

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

"You're laughing, are you? Don't you think I know what took place? You don't want to tell me what really happened. There'd be grounds for a criminal prosecution if you did."

"But you mentioned a count and a countess."

"Was not this dog's mistress the Countess wronged by the butler Mudarra?"

The woman burst out laughing again so uproariously that I muttered to myself distractedly: She must be Mudarra's accomplice and naturally she'll hide as much as she can.

"You're mad," the unknown woman added.

"Lunatic, lunatic. I'm suffocated. Oh! My God!"

"I know everything. Come now. Don't hide it from me. Tell me what the Countess died of."

"For crying out loud, what countess?" exclaimed the woman, laughing even more loudly.

"Don't think you fool me with your laughter!" I replied. "The Countess was either poisoned or murdered. There's no doubt about it in my mind."

At this juncture the tram arrived at Pozas and I had reached the end of my journey. We all got off. The English woman gave me a look indicative of her elation at finding herself free of me and each of us went in our several directions. I followed the woman with the dog, plying her with questions, until she reached her home still laughing at my determination to know better about other people's lives. Once alone in the street, I remembered the object of my journey and set off to visit the house where I was due to hand over those books. I gave them to the person who had asked for them in order to read them, and I started to walk up and down opposite Buen Suceso, waiting for the tram to reappear so I could then return to the opposite end of Madrid again.

I waited a long time and finally, just as it was getting dark, the tram prepared to leave.

I got on and the first thing I saw was the English lady sitting where she had sat before. When she saw me get on and sit down next to her, the expression on her face beggared description. She went as red as a beetroot and exclaimed:

"Oh! You again. I complain to driver—you are for high jump this time."

I was so preoccupied with my own emotions that, without paying attention to what the English lady was saying in her laborious utterances, I answered her thus:

"Madam, there is no doubt that the Countess was either poisoned or killed. You have no idea of that man's ferocity."

The tram continued on its way and every now and then stopped to take on passengers. Near the royal palace three got on, occupying seats opposite me. One of them was a tall, thin and bony man with very stern eyes and a bell-like voice that imposed respect.

They hadn't been on ten minutes when this man turned to the others and said:

"Poor thing! How she cried out in her dying moments! The bullet went in above her right shoulder-blade and penetrated down to her heart."

"What?" I exclaimed all of a sudden. "She died of a shot and not a stab wound?"

The three of them looked at me in amazement.

"Of a shot, sir, yes," the tall, thin and bony one said with a certain amount of surliness.

"And that woman maintained she had died of food poisoning," I said, more interested in this affair by the minute. "Tell me how it came about."

"And what concern is it of yours?" said the other with an offhand gesture.

"I'm very interested indeed to know the end of this horrific tragedy. Does it not seem to be straight from the pages of a novel?"

"Where do novels and dead people come into it? Either you're mad or you're trying to make fun of us."

"Young man, be careful what you joke about," added the tall and thin one.

"Don't you think I know what happened? I know it all from start to finish. I witnessed all the various scenes of this horrendous crime. But you're saying that the Countess died of a pistol shot."

"Good God. We weren't talking about a Countess, but about my female dog that we inadvertently shot while out hunting. If you want to make a joke of it, meet me outside and I'll answer you as you deserve."

"I see where you're coming from. Now you're determined to keep the truth hidden," I said, thinking that these men wanted to lead me astray in my inquiries, transforming that unfortunate lady into a female dog.

One of my interlocutors was doubtless preparing his answer, more physical than the case required, when the English woman put her finger to her temple as if to indicate to them that my head did not function properly. They calmed down at this and spoke not a single word more for the whole of their journey, which finished for them at the Puerta del Sol. No doubt they had been afraid of me.

I was so fixated on the idea that a crime had been committed that it was in vain that I tried to calm down as I reasoned out the threads of such a complicated question. But each time I did so my confusion grew and the image of the poor lady refused to leave me. In all the countenances that succeeded one another inside the tram, I thought I might see something that would contribute to an explanation of the enigma. I felt a frightful overheating of my brain and no doubt this inner disturbance was reflected in my face as everyone looked at me as at something that you don't see every day.

VII

There was yet another incident which would turn my head during that fateful journey. On passing through the Calle de Alcalá a man got on with his wife. He sat down next to me. He was a man who seemed affected by some strong and recent emotion and I could even believe that, from time to time, he raised his handkerchief to his eyes to wipe away invisible tears which were no doubt being shed behind the dark green lenses of his unusual spectacles. After a short time he said in a low voice to the person I took to be his wife:

"They suspect that she was poisoned, there's no doubt about it. Don Mateo's just told me. Poor woman!"

"How terrible! That's what I thought too," answered his wife.

"What else can you expect from such savages?"

"I won't leave a stone unturned till I get to the bottom of this business."

I, who was all ears, also said in a low voice: "Yes, sir, she was poisoned. There's proof of it."

"What? You know? Did you know her too?" said the man with the green specs, turning towards me.

"Yes, sir. And I do not doubt that her death was a violent one, no matter how hard

they try to make us believe it was food poisoning."

"I'm of the same opinion. What an excellent woman! But how do you know all this for a fact?"

"I know, I know," I replied, extremely pleased that this man at least did not think I was mad.

"You'll make a declaration to the court then, for the judge has already started to sum up."

"I'll be happy just to see these rascals get what's coming to them. I'll make that declaration, yes, I will, sir."

My moral blindness had reached such a point that I ended up completely taken in by this event half dreamed, half read about, and believed it as I now believe I'm writing with a pen.

"Indeed I will, sir, for it is necessary to clear up this mystery so that the perpetrators of this crime can be punished. I will declare that she was poisoned by a cup of tea, the same as the young man."

"Did you hear that, Petronila?" said the bespectacled man to his wife. "By a cup of tea."

"Yes, it surprises me," the lady answered. "What terrible things those monsters were capable of!"

"It's true, sir. With a cup of tea. The Countess was playing the piano."

"What countess?" the man asked, interrupting me. "The countess. The woman who was poisoned."

"The woman in question was no countess."

"Come off it. You too are one of those determined to hide the facts in this case."

"This was no countess or duchess, but simply the woman who did my laundry for me, the wife of the pointsman at Madrid North station."

"A laundress, eh?" I said roguishly. "You won't make me swallow that one."

The man and his wife looked at me quizzically and muttered some words to each other. From a gesture that I saw the woman make I understood that she had formed the deep conviction I was drunk. I opted not to argue and said nothing, content to despise such an irreverent supposition in silence as befits great souls. My anxiety knew no bounds. The Countess was not absent for a moment from my thoughts and she had started to interest me by reason of her sinister end as if all that had not been a morbid expression of my own impulse to fantasize, forged by successive visions and conversations. Finally, to understand to what extreme my madness carried me, I am going to relate the ultimate occurrence on this journey of mine. I shall say with what extravagance I put an end to the painful combat of my understanding caught in a battle with an army of shadows.

The tram was entering the calle de Serrano when I chanced to look through the window opposite where I was sitting into the street, weakly lit by street lights, and I saw a man go by. I shouted with surprise and foolishly exclaimed the following:

"There he goes. It's him, Mudarra, the principal author of so many crimes."

I ordered the tram to stop and alighted or rather jumped through the door, colliding with the feet and legs of the passengers. I descended to the street and ran after that man, shouting:

"Stop him! Stop him! Murderer!"

You can imagine what the effect of these words would have been in such a tranquil neighbourhood. The man in question, the same one I had seen in the tram that afternoon, was arrested. I, for my part, did not stop shouting:

"He's the one who prepared the poison for the Countess, the one who murdered the Countess."

There was a moment of indescribable confusion. He affirmed that I was mad, but we were both placed in police custody. Afterwards I lost all notion of what was

happening around me. I do not remember what I did that night in the place where they locked me up. The most vivid recollection that I have of such a strange event was to have awoken from the deep sleep I fell into, a veritable drunken stupor morally produced, I know not how, by one of the passing phenomena of alienation that science now studies with great care as one of the heralds of madness.

As you can surmise the event did not have consequences because the unsympathetic person I baptized with the name of Mudarra was an honourable grocer who had never in his life poisoned any countess. But for a long time afterwards I persisted in my self-deception and was wont to exclaim: "Poor countess. Whatever they say, I'll stick to my guns. No-one will persuade me that you did not end your days at the hand of your irate husband."

Months needed to pass for the shadows to return to the unknown place from whence they had come forth driving me mad and for reality to gain the ascendance in my head. I always laugh when I remember that journey and all the consideration I had lavished beforehand on my dreamed-of victim I now devoted to—who do you think?—my travelling companion on that anguished expedition, the irascible English woman, whose foot I dislocated when I hastily left the tram to run after the alleged butler.

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