

A DIFFICULT PREDICAMENT (Un Lance Pesado)

On the road about half-way between Ágreda and Tarazona, in a hollow where there is a small arroyo, there is a miserable-looking hovel which serves as an inn, where mule drivers from Castile or Aragon stop to have something to drink on hot days, or sit by the fire when it is cold in the winter. This inn was not what you might consider one of the safest places to visit, since the local chronicles are full of stories about nocturnal assaults, robberies, and killings, which occurred in its vicinity, and were carried out by the rogues who frequent the inn, only to be covered up by the innkeeper, a man whose character was as bad as the end which they say he experienced.

But now frequent visits by the Guardia Civil and also a change of ownership have been more than enough to make the region, which was once dangerous, one of the safest places on the road to Tarazona. At least, that is what I was told by people who know the area. However, once a reputation is created, it is difficult to ignore it. Rare is the person who, when he enters that ravine and sees that dark, rundown shanty, does not stop and hesitate; rare is the person, I repeat, especially if he has something to lose, who would not glance around nervously, check his shotgun to see that it is loaded, and then kick his heels into his horse and gallop through that place as quickly as possible.

The first and only time I visited that place is something I will never forget. There are events which are so strange and horrible that, even if we were to live to be a hundred, would still be as fresh in our memory as the day on which they occurred. And the event which I am going to describe is definitely one like that.

It was some years ago; I was traveling in the company of a friend to visit the ancient monastery of Veruela, a magnificent work of art which I had known about for a long time and had always wanted to see. We had started out at dawn from a place near Soria where I lived at that time and, after a journey of four or five hours during which we passed through the Madero Mountains, we stopped in Ágreda to eat.

The day had been cloudy and around noon, as we were eating dessert, it was even more cloudy, so I looked out of the window of the inn where we had stopped and saw dark, threatening clouds that were beginning to release drops of rain. I turned to my friend and said:

“Do you think we ought to spend the night here?”

“Let’s wait and see how it is this afternoon,” he answered. And pounding on the table with his hand, he called the waiter and ordered another bottle of wine after the two we had already drunk. And I mention the number of bottles because if the reader, as in the story of Sancho’s goats, can keep track of the number of bottles we drank, he may find it easier to accept the outcome of the story I am about to tell him.

By the time we had finished that third bottle, it was raining cats and dogs. We ordered a fourth one, and by the time we discarded the empty bottle, I don’t know if it was raining or thundering; all I can say is that, while the room was shaking around us, we stumbled down the stairs, we saddled our horses, and in a few minutes we were riding as fast as we could down the road to Tarazona, without paying any any more attention to the thunder, the hail, or the rain, than the possibility of an invasion by the Grand Turk. And so we continued without stopping, until we reached the hollow where the inn was located.

The rain was falling in torrents, the road had become a lake, and we were soaked to the bone. Perhaps the cold, perhaps the wind on our face, perhaps our nervous tension, or all three things together, helped to clear our minds a little. Night was beginning to fall, and the road looked impassable. Tarazona was still more than three leagues away, and the stream flowing through the hollow was no longer an arroyo, but a river.

“What are we going to do?” I exclaimed, looking worriedly at my friend, who was trying without success to wade through the water.

“We don’t have much choice,” he answered, unperturbed; “either we stop at the inn, or we go back to Ágreda, because there is no way I am going to wade this stream tonight.”

When I heard him say that, I turned to look at the run-down shack without being able to keep from thinking of all the terrible things I had heard about it. Preoccupied by these sinister ideas, I remained silent.

“Heck with it!” my friend, continued; “let’s stay here; if there is no bed, there will still be a glass of wine, and if they’re out of bread, cakes are good.”

After saying that, he got off his horse and started walking toward the door of the inn. I followed him reluctantly, and it cost me considerable effort not to mention the fear I felt, since I didn’t want to seem apprehensive, and certainly not ridiculous. We knocked and knocked on the door of the inn, but nobody came to open it. However, I thought I could hear voices inside, and through the cracks of some loosely connected boards in the door, we could make out the flames of the hearth. We knocked again even louder, and finally the door opened and the innkeeper appeared on the threshold.

“I beg your pardon, gentlemen,” he said with a smile on his face, “we heard knocking, but since there was such a large storm brewing outside, we thought it was just the wind rattling the door.

My friend seemed satisfied with this explanation; however, the innkeeper’s affability and his apologetic words bothered me. If he had showed signs of being cunning and devious, like I had been expecting, I perhaps might not have given it much thought. Anyway, we entered the kitchen, and my first thought was to look around for the people whose voices we had heard through the cracks in the door. But there was no one but a rather attractive young woman who was stirring the hearth, and a cat curled up next to the fire. “Where can the others have gone?” I wondered and, trying my best to disguise what I was doing, I stomped on the floor to see if there could be a trapdoor. While I was still silent and reserved and the innkeeper was busy removing the saddles from our horses, my friend, under the pretext of lighting a cigarette, approached the fire and, after making some customary pleasant remarks, started a conversation with the girl of the inn. I have never seen a more gracious, and more innocent expression, than that of this girl, nor have I ever seen anyone who inspired me with a greater instinctive sense of repulsion and antipathy. The innkeeper had finished what he was doing and sat down in the corner of the kitchen; the girl put a rickety pine table in front of the hearth, and on it a pitcher with two glasses. My friend began to drink and chat, while I drank silently. The innkeeper was dozing; the cat made a peculiar rumbling sound; the girl stared at us with two eyes that seemed larger than her face; the flames of the hearth danced around making fantastic shadows appear on the walls; drops of rain beat on the windows, and outside we could see flashes of lightning. The wind was moaning as it passed, and the arroyo, which had been swelled by the downpour, washed against the stones of the house with a strange, monotonous murmur. At that moment my friend began to sing:

*La dona è mobile
É piuma al vento
Muta d'accento
É di pensier.
A sempre amábile
Leggiadro viso
É il pianitto é il riso
É mensognier.*

It is difficult to explain the effect the music had on me at that moment; what I can say is that, when we decided to go to bed and the innkeeper took us to the room where he had made my bed and my friend climbed the stairs to his room, the memory of the final act of *Rigoletto* was so strong that I was not able to avoid an involuntary shudder when, with a thick, loud voice, the innkeeper said:

“Buenas noches. Buenas noches...” He said it in perfect Spanish, but when he did so, I seemed to hear the woeful notes of the orchestra accompanying the song of *Sparafucile*, and I heard his sinister voice telling me, with a tone of horrible sarcasm:

“Buona notte! “

No, nothing about the terrible night when that unfortunate jester caused the death of his daughter by making a tragic mistake is anything you would want to repeat.

While I was thinking, I heard the boards of the ceiling creak. Undoubtedly my friend, who was staying in the room above me, was getting ready to go to bed, and I put out the light and got into mine. Fatigue can be stronger than the greatest anxiety, so in spite of the awful thoughts I had had, in five minutes I was sleeping like a log. I don't know how long I had been asleep when, in my dreams, I seemed to hear voices speaking softly outside the door to my room. I tried to hear what they were saying, but that was not possible; all I could make out were some confused words that made no sense.

Nevertheless, I was able to catch a few that were rather suspicious, and then the sound of voices began to come from farther away and, finally, I could no longer hear them.

After the voices stopped, there was a moment of silence and then I heard the sound of stairs creaking imperceptibly, as though someone were trying to climb them cautiously without being heard; after that I heard very clearly the sound of someone walking on the floor over my head. I was at a loss as to what I should do; I turned over and tried to get up, but it felt like I was bound there or was held in place by a powerful force.

During this moment of nervous excitement, a sharp cry struck my ears, and the floor above me began to shake as if a some sort of struggle were taking place. I heard loud, uneven footsteps, and I heard furniture being moved; I seemed to hear some confused cursing and then a strong thud, as though someone had fallen on the floor... After that, silence... followed by some moaning that gradually disappeared, and then a soft, regular sound like the pendulum of a clock. It sounded like it was blood dripping through a crack in the ceiling and falling, drop by drop, into my room. Making an effort, I sat up in my bed and rubbed my eyes; I breathed heavily, and my mind was in turmoil.

“It must have been a dream, a horrible nightmare” I said, shaking myself to see if I was still sleeping.

No, unfortunately I was awake, just as I am right now, and blood was still dripping into my room, making a constant, monotonous sound, like drops of water falling into a pond. I did my best to conquer the fear that had overwhelmed me; I climbed out of bed without turning on the light; I felt around and picked up my shotgun, making sure it was cocked.

I went into the kitchen and stumbled around, bumping into several chairs and tipping over a table, making a loud noise. I shouted for the innkeeper, until both he and his daughter appeared.

The daughter, who was scantily clad, came through one door carrying a candle, and her worried father, dressed in his underclothes, rushed through another. My first impulse was to raise my shotgun and point it at the innkeeper. When she saw me do that, his daughter cried out, and the innkeeper backed toward the hearth and crossed himself, as though he thought his time on earth had come.

“Where is my friend?” I asked him two or three times, without ceasing to point my gun at him.

His fear must have kept him from opening his mouth; the girl, on the other hand, began to scream and shout. Seeing his reaction as a sign of his guilt, I don’t know what I would have done, if my friend had not suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs.

“What!” I exclaimed, astonished to see him, “didn’t they kill you?”

“Kill me!” he responded. “Obviously not, but I was sleeping soundly, when this awful racket woke me up.

“But...” I continued, more confused than ever, “what about the moans and the sound of a struggle, which I heard quite clearly?”

“You must have been dreaming,” my friend interrupted with a smile.

“But what about the sound of those drops of...?” I protested quickly; “there, you can still hear them.”

“Nonsense!” the innkeeper interjected, finally recovering from his fright; “it’s just that this house is very old, and we have had a very bad storm... also, the roof leaks, and the dripping makes that sound.”

The shotgun fell from my hands, and it felt like the ground had opened under my feet.

To give an idea of how embarrassed I felt after this ridiculous outburst, I will only say that when we returned to Ágreda from Tarazona where we went the following day, I took another road and rode for more than half an hour in order to avoid going by that accursed inn once more.