

I AND MY CONSCIENCE (Mi Conciencia y Yo)

*Forgive me, for God's sake, Brother
(A common phrase)*

I definitely have a conscience, and even though it may not always be obvious in my writing, it is still a fact; a fact which I am going to prove to you, if what I am going to say can be credited.

My literary conscience may be lacking, but not the type of conscience that lives deep in the heart of man, a conscience that sometimes blocks his path and, crossing its arms in front of him, greets him with scornful laughter or a frightful denunciation, throwing in his face all his defects, his foolish ideas, or his crimes.

But let's get back to the fact that I have a conscience; the incident which I am going to describe should show that.

Several nights ago when I was done eating I felt bored, which is something that happens to me quite often. What to do about it? "I will go take a walk, and that will cure me of my boredom," I said; and I did just that. It is a constant mania of man to try and destroy those things which are destroying him: boredom, time... those are the things that we want to get rid of, before they get rid of us. Boredom is related to time, and the latter helped to strengthen my adversary. The clouds broke out with downpours, there was an incredible number of lightning flashes, and the cold wind began to cover my face with rain until I became soaked to the bone. "Well, all the same, I am going to enjoy myself," I insisted. I wrapped myself in my cloak and opened my umbrella, and then I began to wander haphazardly. I had crossed some of the streets of Madrid with water up to my ankles; my mind was also wandering: I on the ground, and it... who knows, in a world where only the mind can wander. I was not feeling either the rain or the cold when, lo and behold, next to me I heard a sorrowful, trembling voice which, jolting me out of my stupor, said to me:

"Alms, for the love of the blessed Virgin, sir."

"For the love of God, forgive me, Brother," I answered and kept on walking.

"Up to this point everything was logical; he had asked me for alms for the love of the Virgin, and I had denied it for the love of God, so love equals love; for charity, charity, for courtesy, courtesy; and besides, I had called him Brother..." That is what I said to myself when, in the middle of a gust of wind, I heard an echo that was saying *Brother*; and that echo was followed by another which was filled with scornful laughter: laughter that faded like a note of music and was lost in the distance; laughter that was drowned out by the noise of the wind. I turned around; in the glow of a flash of lightning, I thought I saw the edge of a white tunic, the fold of a woman's dress who was running away and was hiding somewhere, perhaps in the fog. It was an illusion, of course; all I saw was the beggar, a pale young man who was stretching out his hand with a pleading look; a young man whose clothes were dripping and whose bare feet were sunken in the cold water flowing through the street... "My mind is playing tricks on me," I muttered and kept on walking...

A few minutes had passed; I was in a café with a group of young men of my age; they were laughing and joking; this one was telling a tale, and that one, another; we all knew that they were lies, but we listened to them as though they were true. I was beginning to

enjoy myself when, in the midst of the joking and the laughter of those present, I heard more laughter, a loud, raucous laughter which was strident, but then became lost in the sound of dishes rattling and glasses clicking: *Brother* I heard the same feminine voice say once more; *Brother*. Do you know what that word means? If you don't, why did you say it? And if you do, why do you desecrate it? There are thousands of words that your impure lips can use, words that express love, pride, pleasure, or ambition; but never say *Brother*; do not profane that sacred word that was born in Heaven and then was repeated on earth by the Savior; never repeat it unless a tremor in your spirit tells you that it comes from Him; because that word is a mystery for mankind: "Brother!" Is it that you suffer, that you weep and tremble with cold while you are bored, because you no longer know how to be happy? "Brother!" What could have led you to look with indifference at one who is dying of hunger, who sees the left-overs on your table that even dogs would not eat when they are sated. "Brother!" Oh! Don't be a hypocrite. If you are unkind, don't make it worse. Don't you see the cruel irony in that word? Call that beggar a man; no, not a man...; not a stranger, either...; call him anything, anything that indicates that between you and him there is nothing that unites you; say it to him in order to justify your refusal, so as not to highlight your crime." The voice became silent, and I had been listening, livid with fear. I jumped up and started to flee. My friends asked me:

"What's wrong? Are you ill?"

"No," I answered, and I rushed toward the door without saying goodbye.

As I was leaving, I heard one of them say:

"Those poets are the strangest people you can find. Where do you think that one is going?"

"Where?" they asked, with curiosity.

"Where?" the astute observer continued. "Haven't you noticed how he has been silent and pensive for some time?"

"Yes,"

"Well, he was trying to come up with the conclusion of a zarzuela he has been trying to finish. He just thought of it, and he is rushing to write it down before he forgets it."

"Of course, of course," they all repeated. "He is hurrying to finish his zarzuela."

And with that, they were all satisfied.

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I found myself in the street; I was frightened and didn't know where to go, so I wandered at random...

A quarter of an hour later I came to the Plazuela del Rey, and I entered the Circus; don't think that it was in order to amuse myself, no; for the first time in my life I was afraid to be alone with a woman, because that woman was my conscience.