

THE INN OF THE CATS

I

In Seville, on the road that stretches from the gate of La Macarena to the Convent of San Jerónimo, there is a small inn which, because of its location and the remarkable things that have happened there, is becoming, if it is not already, the most unusual and unique inn in all Andalusia.

Imagine a white building covered with red tiles, some of which have turned green, and on which many little yellow flowers and clumps of mignonette are growing. A small roof juts out in front and shades the lintel of the doorway; on either side of the door are benches of brick and mortar, and several windows, including some that are square or rectangular, and some that are shaped like an arch, or a dormer. There are several stakes with steel rings where horses can be tied. Twisting around the wooden framework that supports it, the branches of an old grapevine with broad, green leaves form a canopy over three pine benches, a half-dozen chairs with wicker seats, and six or seven tables with wobbly legs and loosely connected boards.

On one side of the building a honeysuckle vine climbs up, clinging to the cracks in the wall until it reaches the roof where several more small vines are hanging from the eaves, forming a canopy of greenness. On the other side, a wattle fence marks the edge of a small garden that looks like a basket of reeds brimming with flowers. The branches of two large trees that rise up behind the inn form a dark background for its white chimneys. Added to this picture is the fence of the orchard covered with brambles and blackberries, as well as the bushes growing on the banks of the Guadalquivir which flows by until it reaches the Convent of San Jerónimo which is visible above the olive trees surrounding it, with the black outline of its towers silhouetted against the transparent, blue sky.

Imagine this scene animated by the figures of men, women, children, and animals, in groups that are as picturesque as they are characteristic. Here is the heavysset, red-faced innkeeper sitting in the sun while he takes out his tobacco and begins to roll a cigarette; there, is a huckster from La Macarena who is singing with half-closed eyes and playing a guitar while others keep the rhythm by clapping their hands, or striking the tables with their cups. Then, there is a multitude of girls, with colorful scarves of loosely woven cloth and a whole potful of carnations in their hair, who are playing a tambourine and screaming and laughing, while they rock a swing that hangs from a tree. The servants of the inn come and go with trays of wine and plates of olives, two drunks argue with a man who was flirting with a pretty girl, a rooster is crowing proudly while perched on the fence of the corral, and a dog barks at the boys who are harassing him with sticks and stones. The oil bubbles and jumps in a pan where fish are frying, the drivers of a calash crack their whips as it rolls by raising a cloud of dust. The sound of songs, of castanets, of laughter and voices, of whistles and guitars, of the pounding of tables and clapping, of jars being broken, and a thousand other noises, all make a cheerful racket that is difficult to describe. Imagine all this happening on a tranquil afternoon, on the afternoon of one of the most beautiful days in Andalusia, where they are always beautiful, and you will have an idea of the spectacle that greeted my eyes when, attracted by its fame, I went for the first time to visit that renowned inn.

Time has passed, and that was at least ten or twelve years ago. When I first got there I was outside of my natural environment. Beginning with my clothes and ending with the astonished expression on my face, everything about me clashed with the picture of that innocent and boisterous happiness. When people passed by me, they seemed to look at me with the displeasure with which they would regard an unwelcome outsider.

Not wanting to call attention to myself nor to become the target of some practical joke, I sat down on one side of the door to the inn and ordered a drink, which I didn't drink, and when it seemed that people had forgotten my strange appearance, I took a sheet of paper out of the drawing kit, which I always carry with me. I sharpened a pencil and began to look for a good example of something I could copy, and keep, as a reminder of that scene and that day.

As you might expect, my eyes came to rest on one of the girls who was part of a group gathered around the swing. She was tall and slender, with light brown skin, beautiful black eyes, and with hair that was as black as her eyes. While I was making the drawing, there was a group of young men that included one who was playing a guitar; he played a number of songs alluding to the charms, the love secrets, the preferences or the jealousy and scorn, of the girls who were having fun around the swing, songs to which they then responded with others that were no less humorous, spicy and clever.

The slender dark-haired girl I had chosen as my model raised her voice over that of the other girls and began to make up witty verses which she sang, greeted by the laughter and the clapping of her companions, while the one who was playing the guitar seemed to be the spokesman for the boys, as well as the one who stood out as the most humorous and the most talented.

It did not take me long to realize that, between these two, there was some kind of affection, which was revealed by their songs full of hints and loving phrases.

By the time I finished my drawing, it was beginning to get dark. On the cathedral they had already lit several torches in the bell tower, and these lights seemed like the fiery eyes of that granite giant which dominated the entire city. The groups of people were slowly dissolving as their members began to march away and disappear in the mists of twilight. The group of girls left together and were still singing, as their voices gradually became weaker and were lost among other sounds that floated in the air. It was all coming to an end at the same time: the day, the noise, the spirit of celebration, and all that remained was an echo, like the sweet drowsiness that one feels after awakening from a pleasant dream.

After the last person had disappeared, I folded my drawing and placed it in my kit; I raised my hand and called the waiter, I paid the bill and was about to leave, when I felt someone softly grasp my arm. It was the boy with the guitar whom I had noticed earlier, and who had looked at me with curiosity while I was drawing; what I had not noticed was that after he was done with his singing he had furtively approached the place where I was sitting, in order to see what I was doing as I looked with such intensity at the woman in whom he was interested.

"Pardon me, sir," he said to me, with the tone of someone who was trying to soften his request as much as possible; "I would like to ask you a favor."

"A favor?" I exclaimed, without knowing what it was he wanted. "Tell me, and if it is in my power, I will be glad to grant it."

"Would be willing to give me the drawing you just made?"

When I heard these words, I couldn't help but be a little perplexed. I was disconcerted because his request was rather unexpected, and also, from the tone of his voice and the way he said it, I wasn't sure if it was a request, or if it was also a threat. He must have understood my uncertainty, because he hastened to add:

"I am asking you this for the sake of my mother, for the woman I love most in this world, if I love anything. You can also ask me for anything that I am able to do for you within my limited means."

I didn't know what to say in order to get out of making a commitment. I would have preferred that he had not sneaked up on me so slyly and so unexpectedly, to ask for the sketch of that woman whose beauty had impressed me so much; but whether it was the surprise, or whether I just couldn't think what to say to him, the fact was that I opened my drawing kit, I took out the paper, and I handed it to him without saying a word.

It would be difficult for me to give an accurate description of the young man's expression of gratitude, his exclamation on seeing the drawing again, the care with which he folded it and placed it in his sash, and the enthusiasm with which he described his good fortune on having met, what he called, such a talented and generous young man. I can only say that, by the time all this was finished, it was completely dark, and though I told him he didn't have to accompany me to the gate of La Macarena, he insisted until I finally agreed, and we set off together. The distance was short, but while it lasted, he found a way to tell me everything about the story of his love.

The inn where the event had taken place belonged to his father who had told him that when he got married, he would give him an orchard that was adjacent to the inn which also belonged to him. As for the girl who was the object of his love, whom he described in glowing terms, she was called Amparo; she had grown up in his house since she was a little girl, and no one knew who her parents were. All this, and many other details of little interest to me, were described as we were walking. When we finally arrived at the gate to the city, he gave a squeeze to my hand and, after offering his services once again, he marched away singing a song whose words echoed through the silence of the night. I thought of how he looked as he left; his happiness was contagious, and I felt a strange, intangible happiness, a happiness, as it were, of reflection.

He was still singing at the top of his voice, and one of his songs was as follows:

Darling of my soul,
see how beautiful she was:
she seemed like the Virgin
of Consolación de Utrera.

When his voice finally began to fade away, I heard another that was gentle and urgent which was even farther away. It was she. And she was waiting impatiently.

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A few days after that I left Seville. Many years passed before I returned, and I forgot many of the things that happened to me there. But the memory of this unusual and tranquil happiness will never be erased from my mind.

II

As I said, during the time that passed after I left Seville, I never forgot what happened that afternoon, and that memory sometimes passed through my mind like a refreshing breeze that cools the heat of my brow. When fate brought me again to the city which poets call *The Queen of Andalusia*, one of the things which most impressed me was the changes that had occurred during the time of my absence. I had left one Seville, and I found another that was very different. The Seville I knew was a large, beautiful city full of charm, with many distinctive and original features, and I found it so changed that I can only compare it to what an expert on our customs would feel if they happened to meet a cigar merchant from the Triana district wearing a hoop-skirt *a la emperatriz*, a top hat, and hair *a lo Fuoco*. I could not help but be shocked by this strange and inharmonic combination of Andalusian character and French veneer, which I saw in everything that surrounded me.

I visited the best known buildings, and I wandered through the complicated streets of the Santa Cruz district. During the course of my wanderings, I was surprised to see how many new things had cropped up without any obvious reason for the change; and there were many old things that had disappeared, again, without any explanation as to why this was so. I finally went to the banks of the river, which has always been one of my favorite places to visit in Seville.

After I had admired the magnificent panorama where the opposite banks of the river are joined by the stone bridge; after I had examined in detail all the picturesque features of the curving riverbanks, flanked by gardens, palaces, and white mansions; and after I studied the many boats anchored in its waters and I heard the hustle and bustle of the workers on the docks, I finally headed toward San Jerónimo.

I still had the memory of that quiet landscape with which the vegetation of Andalusia displays its natural charm. With the help of my memory, as if I were traveling upstream in a boat, I pictured the island of Cartuja with its groves and its high towers and, on the opposite bank, the Humeros district with the old walls of the city that were part Arab and part Roman; I also pictured the orchards with their vine-covered fences, the water wheels shaded by some large trees, and, finally, San Jerónimo.

And when I arrived there in my fancies, I remembered even more vividly the sight of the popular inn; I imagined that I was again attending one of those crowded festivals and heard the girls singing as they pushed the swing; I pictured groups of people wandering through the meadows, some of them having a picnic while others argued, some laughing and others dancing, and all of them brimming with youthful enthusiasm and happiness. There, far away from the group of young girls who were laughing and singing, was the woman surrounded by her children, and there was her calm and satisfied husband who was looking with tenderness at all the people whom he loved most in this world: his wife, his children and his father who, as he had done ten years ago, was sitting in the doorway of his inn calmly rolling a cigarette, without any change in his appearance, except that his hair was now gray.

A friend who happened to be with me while I was imagining all this, noticed the way I seemed to be lost in thought for such a long time, and he grabbed hold of my arm and asked me:

“What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about the Inn of the Cats,” I replied, “about all the pleasant memories I have of the time when I was in San Jerónimo... I had just finished remembering all the things that happened there, which were so wonderful, and I am sure they must still be just as beautiful as they were then. And as for the Inn of the Cats,” I continued, turning to my friend, “when are we going there to eat lunch and have a good time?”

“Have a good time?” my friend exclaimed with an astonished expression that surprised me. “That is not exactly the best place to go and have a good time.”

“And why not?” I replied, still surprised by his objection.

“The reason is simple,” he said, “because only a hundred paces from the inn they have made a cemetery.”

Now it was my turn to look at him with astonishment, and I continued thinking for a few moments, without saying anything further.

We eventually returned to the city. That day and several more went by, and I was still not able to get rid of the impression that unexpected news had made on me. No matter how I thought about it, my imaginary story about the dark haired girl now did not have an ending, since the one I had conceived, full of peaceful happiness, did not seem possible with a cemetery as the background.

Resolved to cure my doubts, one afternoon I pretended to have a slight indisposition so that I would not have to accompany my friend on our customary outings and could go by myself to the inn. Once I had left behind the picturesque suburb of La Macarena, I began to follow the narrow pathway through the orchards, and I could already tell that there was something strange in everything around me.

Either it was because the afternoon was cloudy, or else my frame of mind was disposed to melancholy; but the fact was that I felt cold and sad, and I noticed a silence that reminded me of the quietness we associate with death.

I kept on walking for a while, as I cut through the orchards to save time. After that, I entered the road to San Lázaro, and from there I could see the convent of San Jerónimo in the distance.

Perhaps it was an illusion, but it seemed to me that the vegetation along the road where the dead had traveled had taken on a different color. It seemed to me that the warm, harmonious colors and the usual freshness of the trees were both lacking. The landscape was monotonous, and the figures seemed cut off from each other. There was a cart that was moving slowly, draped with mourning cloths, not raising dust or cracking a whip, almost as though it were not moving. There was also a sinister-looking man with a pickaxe on his shoulder, a priest with his long, dark robe, and an unpleasant group of poorly dressed old people, carrying unlit candles in their hands, moving silently, with their heads bowed, while looking at the ground.

It seemed as though I had been transported somewhere where the environment that surrounded me was the same, but the colors were erased, leaving only a dull impression of them. The impression I had could only be compared to what we feel in a dream when, in some inexplicable way, things exist, and do not exist at the same time, and the places where we find ourselves are transformed in a strange and impossible fashion.

I finally arrived at the inn. I was able recognize it only because of the sign that was still there on one of the walls, because the building itself now seemed to have a different size and shape. It was now much more run down, sad and neglected, and the shadow of the cemetery, which extended behind it, seemed to envelope it like a shroud.

The innkeeper was there, completely alone and by himself. I am not sure exactly how I knew it, but I could tell that he was the same man from ten years ago. When I saw him before, he seemed to be around fifty years old and was full of life and vigor; but now he had aged so that he seemed like a decrepit old person who was about to die.

I sat down at one of the tables and asked for something to drink, which the innkeeper brought me. While we were talking, one thing led to another, and we eventually got around to the story whose last chapter was still unknown to me, in spite of the fact that I had tried to create so many different endings.

“Everything seems to have worked against us since the time you were here,” the poor old man told me. “And these are the results. Amparo was the child of our heart; she had grown up here almost since the time she was born; she became the joy of the house. She never missed her real father, because I always loved her as though she were my daughter. My son always loved her too, first as a brother, and then with an even greater affection. They were about to get married. I had promised them the best part of what little land I owned, since what I made with my business would be enough for me to live comfortably. That was when some evil Devil began to envy our happiness and destroyed everything. First, there was a rumor that someone was going to locate a cemetery somewhere in this part of San Jerónimo. Some said it was going to be in a distant part; others said it would be right here. We were all worrying about it, when an even greater disaster fell upon us. One day a carriage arrived with two Lords. They began to ask endless questions about Amparo, whom I had rescued from a Home for Abandoned Children. They asked me about the clothes she was wearing when she was abandoned, which I still had, and they found that Amparo was the child of some rich Lord, who then did everything he could to take her away from us. And he was successful. I don’t want to think about the day they took her away. She was crying her eyes out, my son wanted to do something desperate, and I was so overcome that I didn’t know what was happening to me. So she was gone! That is, she didn’t go, because she loved us too much to leave, but they took her anyway, and a curse was cast on this house. After a fit of desperation, my son fell into a profound lethargy. I don’t know how to express what happened to me. I felt like my world had ended. And while all this was happening, they began to create the cemetery. People avoided this location. There were no more fiestas, no music, or singing; all the happiness had left this place, just as it had vanished from our souls. And Amparo was no happier than we were. After growing up here, amid the hustle and bustle of the inn, and taught to feel happy in poverty, she was torn away from this life, and she dried up, like flowers that are picked from a garden and placed in box. My son made endless efforts to see her again and speak with her for a moment. But it was all in vain, because her new family wouldn’t permit it. He finally saw her, but it was only after she had died and her burial occurred out here. I hadn’t heard about it, so I didn’t know why I cried when I saw the coffin go by. But the heart knows, and it was shouting to me:

‘This one is young like Amparo. She would be beautiful like Amparo. Who knows if it might not be her?’ And it was. My son followed the procession and entered the burial site. And when they opened the casket he cried out and fell to the ground. They had to bring him home; but after that he lost his mind, and he is still mad.”

As the poor man reached this point in his story, two unpleasant and repugnant-looking gravediggers entered the inn. Now that their work was done, they were coming to drink *to the health of the dead* as one of them put it, accompanying his joke with a stupid smile.

The innkeeper wiped away a tear with the back of his hand, and then went to serve them.

It was now night, and everything was sad and gloomy. The sky was black, and all the countryside looked the same. From the branches of a tree, the decayed rope of the swing was still hanging, moving back and forth in the breeze. To me it looked like the cord of a hangman's noose that was still hanging there after they removed the body of some condemned criminal. The only sounds that reached my ears were the distant barking of some dogs in the orchard, the squeaking of a nearby water wheel, and the quiet words of the two gravediggers who seemed to be contemplating some sacrilegious grave robbery. I don't know... All that still remains in my memory of that scene of desolation, or the earlier one full of happiness, is a confusing recollection that is impossible to reproduce. Although, what I can still hear in my mind, as I heard it then, are the words of a song that was sung by a sorrowful voice, somewhere off in the distance:

The funereal wagon
passed slowly by;
a hand was hanging out,
and I knew it was hers.

It was the poor boy who was locked in one of the rooms of the inn, where he spent his days contemplating the motionless portrait of his lover, without speaking, without eating, without weeping, without ever opening his lips, except to sing this simple, tender verse that contains a poem of sorrow that I was now able to understand.