

A RAY OF MOONLIGHT

(A legend of Soria)

I don't know if this is a real event that seems like a story, or a story that seems like a real event. But what I *can* say is that it offers us a sad truth, a very sad truth, which I may be one of the last to take advantage of, given the state of my imagination.

With this idea, someone else might perhaps have made some gloomy psychological analysis; I have tried to write a story which, for those who see nothing remarkable in its content, will at least entertain them for a while.

I

He was an aristocrat; he was accustomed to the sound of battle, and the sound of a war horn would not have made him raise his head for a moment, nor would it have made him tear his eyes away from the obscure parchment where he was reading the tale of some legendary troubadour.

Those who might have wished to find him would not look for him in the spacious patio of his castle where grooms were training colts, where falconers were teaching falcons to hunt, or where soldiers were spending their days of rest while sharpening their lance with a stone.

"Where is Manrique? Where is your Lord?" his mother would often ask the servants.

"We don't know," the servants would always respond; "perhaps he is in the cloister of the Monastery of the Rock seated on the edge of a tomb, trying to see if he can hear the words of those who have died; or perhaps he is on the bridge, watching the ripples of water flow under the arches; or crouched in a crack between the rocks, trying to count the stars in the sky and watch the clouds pass by; or watching the will-o-the-wisps that float over the surface of a lake. He might be in any place you can think of, except where there are other people."

Manrique loved solitude; in fact, he loved it so much that he often wished he didn't have a shadow so it wouldn't follow him wherever he went.

He loved solitude because it allowed him to give his imagination free rein and create a fantasy world inhabited by strange creatures who were the children of his poetic reveries; because Manrique was a poet, so much so, that he had never been satisfied with ordinary words to express his thoughts, and he had never tried to write them down.

He believed that the flames in the hearth were inhabited by multi-colored fire-spirits that swarmed like golden insects over the surface of the burning logs, or were dancing in luminous clusters of sparks on the tip of the flames; he spent hours seated on a stool in front of the high stone arch of his gothic fireplace, motionless, and with his eyes fixed on the fire.

He believed that underneath the rippling current of the river, in the green moss that grows on the fountain, in the mist that floats over the lake, there are mysterious women—fairies, sylphs, or undines—who utter laments and sighs which he hears in the silence, and which he attempts to translate.

In the clouds, in the air, in the depths of the forest, in cracks in the rocks, he imagined he saw the forms or heard the mysterious sounds of supernatural beings, as well as their unintelligible words, which he could never understand.

Then, there was love! He had been born to dream of love, not to feel it. He loved all women for a moment: one because she was blonde, another because she had red lips, and then another because she swayed like a willow when she walked.

There were times when his madness reached the point where he spent the entire night watching the moon as it floated under silvery clouds, or stars that sparkled in the distance like clusters of precious stones. And on these long nights of poetic insomnia, he would exclaim:

“If it is true, as the Prior of the Rock once told me, that those dots are different worlds, and if it is true that on the pearly globe that travels above the clouds there are people, just imagine how beautiful the women must be who live in this luminous environment. And I will never see them; I will never be able to love them... What can their beauty be like?... What can their love be like?...”

Manrique still wasn't mad enough so that youngsters would mock him, but he was mad enough to speak and make gestures when he was alone, which is where this all begins.

II

Above the Duero River which flows past the time-worn stones in the walls of Soria, there is a bridge leading to the old monastery of the Templars, whose territory stretches along the opposite banks of the river.

During the period of time to which we are referring, the men of the Order had already abandoned their historic stronghold, but the remains of the walls with their towers are still standing and, covered with ivy and white flowers, you can still see the stone arches of the cloister, as well as the lengthy arcade of the Patio of Arms through which the wind moans and bends the tall grass.

In the orchards and the gardens whose paths have not felt the passage of religious feet for many years, the vegetation was able to display its wild splendor without fear that it would be disturbed by the hands of men who were trying to restore its beauty.

Climbing vines had spread over the ancient tree trunks, and a dark lane of poplar trees whose branches touched one another was now filled with grass; spear-plum thistles and nettles had flourished in the center of the sandy pathways, and between the remains of buildings that were about to collapse the weeds swayed in the wind like the plumed crest of a helmet, while snowdrops and bluebells waving back and forth on their flexible stalks proclaimed the victory of ruin and decay.

It was night, a balmy summer night full of fragrant odors and pleasant sounds, with a moon that was white and serene in the midst of a luminous and cloudless sky.

With his imagination caught in a poetic frenzy, Manrique crossed the bridge over the Duero; for a moment he contemplated the dark outlines of the city, silhouetted against a background of white clouds, and then he entered the deserted ruins of the Templars as the clock in the cathedral struck midnight.

It was midnight and the moon, rising slowly through the sky, had reached its highest point as Manrique entered the dark grove of poplars that reached from the ruined cloister

to the banks of the Duero. Suddenly, he uttered a choked cry which contained a strange mixture of surprise, and fear, and joy.

Deep within the shadows of the poplar grove he had seen something white that floated for a moment and then disappeared in the darkness. It was the edge of a woman's dress, a woman who had crossed the path and then was hidden by the trees at the same moment when the mad dreamer of impossible chimeras entered the garden.

"An unknown woman!... In this very place, and at this time!... Yes, that is the one, the woman I am searching for," Manrique exclaimed, and he began to rush after her like an arrow shot from a bow.

III

He reached the point where he had seen the mysterious woman disappear among the branches. She had disappeared, but where was she now? In the distance he seemed to see something white, another white shape moving between the trees.

"Yes, there she is! She must have wings on her feet and she is floating like a shadow!" he declared as he rushed forward, thrusting aside the ivy that was hanging like a tapestry between the branches of the poplar trees. Breaking through the vines and weeds, he burst into a clearing filled with bright moonlight. "Nobody!... But wait... there she goes!..." he exclaimed. "I hear her footsteps on the dry leaves and the sound of her skirt dragging over the ground and rubbing against the branches," and he continued running madly here and there and was never able to find her. "But can I still hear her footsteps," he insisted. "I think she said something; yes, she said something... But the wind wind was blowing through the branches making the leaves rustle, and that kept me from hearing what she said; but there's no doubt... I know I heard it... she was speaking. But in what language? I don't know... in some foreign language."

And he kept running, sometimes believing that he saw her, other times thinking that he could hear her voice; then, thinking that the branches had moved where she disappeared, or imagining that he could make out the shallow impression of her small footprints in the sand, he was sure that he could distinguish an aroma belonging to the woman who was taunting him by continuing to run away through this intricate maze of trees. He kept on running and running, but to no avail.

For several hours he ran back and forth, still searching frantically, sometimes stopping to listen and see if he could hear her voice, and at other times racing through the trees in a desperate but futile effort to find her.

Progressing further and further through the immense woodland that stretched along the banks of the river, he finally arrived at the base of the steep rocky hill on top of which the hermitage of San Saturio is perched.

"Perhaps from up there I would have a better chance of finding her in this confusing labyrinth of trees" he declared, as he climbed up the incline, moving from rock to rock while holding onto the bushes.

He finally reached the top where he could see the city in the distance, as well as an extended portion of the Duero which was twisting below him, carrying its dark and rapid current between the curved banks that contained it.

From this high vantage point Manrique cast his vision over the entire area beneath him, but after a moment he became fixed on a single point, and what he saw there made him utter a bitter blasphemy.

In the distance he could see the moonlight sparkling on the wake of a small boat which was heading toward the opposite bank of the river.

In the boat he was able to distinguish a slender, white form which must be a woman, the same woman he had just seen in the grove of the Templars, the woman of his dreams, the fulfillment of his mad desires. He clambered down the rocky slope with the agility of a mountain goat; he cast aside his hat because the feathers were impeding his movement, and tearing off his wide velvet cloak, he made a dash for the bridge.

It was his intention to cross the bridge and arrive at the city before the boat could reach the opposite side of the river. Madness! By the time Manrique arrived at the gate, panting and covered with sweat, a group which had crossed the Duero from San Saturio was already entering the city, and it was impossible to find the woman he was searching for among all those people.

IV

Although there was no hope of finding the woman among the people from San Saturio, he had not lost the hope that he might find the house in the city where she was living. With this thought fixed in his mind, he entered the city and, heading toward the barrio of San Juan, he began to wander haphazardly through the dark streets.

In those days the streets of Soria were as narrow, dark and twisting as they are today. In them a profound silence reigned, a silence that was only broken by the distant barking of a dog, the sound of a door being opened and closed, or the whinnying of a horse that was stomping in the stable where it was tied.

Manrique listened attentively to these nighttime sounds; once he seemed to hear the footsteps of someone who had already turned the corner of a deserted street; after that he thought he was hearing the voices of people who were somewhere behind him, and he kept waiting for them to catch up with him; for several hours he wandered randomly from one place to another.

He finally stopped before a large stone house that was dark and very old and, as he did so, his eyes shone with an intense expression of joy. In one of the high, arched windows of that house, which we might call a mansion, he saw the glow of a small light that was shining through thin silk curtains and which was also reflected on the wall of the house on the opposite side of the street.

“Yes, there is no doubt; this is where my unknown woman lives,” the young man said, without taking his eyes off that light shining in the window. “This is where she lives... She entered the city through the gate of San Saturio, which leads to this part of the city... And here there is a house where, even though it is after midnight, someone is awake... Still awake! So at this time of night, who could it be but that woman after she returned from her nighttime excursion?... It could only be her; this must be her house.”

So with this idea fixed in his mind, which was swarming with other mad, improbable thoughts, he waited until dawn in front of the high, gothic window where the light burned during the entire night, and which he never stopped watching for a moment.

When the next day finally arrived, in the archway leading to the entrance of the mansion above which the owner's coat of arms was displayed, the massive doors creaked on their hinges as they were opened. A young squire appeared on the threshold with a bunch of keys in his hand. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, revealing a mouthful of teeth that a crocodile could have envied.

After seeing him, it took only an instant for Manrique to rush forward and begin to ask questions:

"Who lives in this house? What is her name? Where is she from, and when did she come to Soria? Is she married? Give me an answer, man!" In this rude way Manrique greeted the poor squire while shaking his arm violently, as the latter looked at him with an expression of incomprehension and then tried to answer his questions:

"This house belongs to the honorable Lord Alonso de Valdecuellos, the Chief Hunter of our Lord the King, who was wounded in the war with the Moors and has returned to the city to recover his strength."

"And what about his daughter?" Manrique interrupted the other man impatiently. "What about his daughter... or his sister... or his wife... or whoever she is?"

"The Lord does not have a woman with him."

"No woman?... Then, who is sleeping up there in that bedroom where I have seen a light burning all night long?"

"Up there? That is where my Lord Alonso sleeps, and because he's been ill, he keeps his lamp burning during the night until it is dawn."

If a bolt of lightning had just fallen unexpectedly at his feet, it could not have caused Manrique to be more astonished or surprised.

V

"I have to find her, I absolutely have to find her, and if I do, I am almost certain to recognize her... And why is that? I can't say..., but I must know her. The sound of her footsteps, hearing something she says, seeing the hem of her dress... any of those things would be enough for me to recognize her. All day and all night I can see the edge of that diaphanous, white fabric floating before my eyes; all day and all night in my mind I can hear the rustling of her dress, the indistinct sound of her words. What did she say?... What was it?... If I could only know what it was, perhaps..., but even without knowing, I will find her...; My heart tells me I will find her, and my heart never deceives me. It is true that I have searched in vain through the streets of Soria and have not been able to find her; night after night I stood on the street corner watching for her; I have now spent more than twenty gold ducats trying to buy information from squires and housekeepers; in San Nicolás I gave holy water to an old woman wrapped in a woolen cloak that made her look like a goddess; and one night coming out of Colegiata after matins I followed the archdeacon's litter like a fool, thinking that the tail of his gown was the dress of my mysterious woman; but none of that matters...; I know I will find her, and the glory of possessing her will be greater than the effort of trying to find her.

And what about her eyes?... They must be blue, blue and moist like the nighttime sky; I love eyes that are blue; they are so expressive, so sad, and so... Yes, there is no doubt: they must be blue; they are blue and her hair was black, very long and black, so that it

floats, like her dress... It seemed that I saw it floating that night, the same as her dress, and it was black...; I am not mistaken, no; it was black.

And how nice it is when you see those blue, almond-shaped eyes and loose black hair, hair that is dark and floating, on a tall woman...; because she was tall, tall and slender, like the angels who adorn the doors of our basilicas, whose oval faces fill the shadows of their granite canopies with such mysterious light!

Her voice... Yes, I heard her voice...; it was soft like the sound of wind in the leaves of the trees, and her movement was slow and deliberate, like a musical cadence.

And that woman who was beautiful, like most of the women of my childhood dreams, who thinks like I think, who likes what I like, and who hates what I hate, who is a kindred spirit, the natural equivalent of my being, wouldn't she be affected by meeting me? Wouldn't she love me just as I love her, with all the strength of my life, and with all the power of my soul?

So let's go, let's go back to the only place where I have seen her... Who knows if she isn't capricious like I am, if she isn't fond of solitude and mystery, like all those dreamers who love to wander through the ruins in the silence of night?

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Two months had passed since the squire of Don Alonso de Valdecuellos had freed Manrique from his mistake, two months during which he had built castles in the air which reality had destroyed like a puff of smoke; two months during which he searched in vain for the unknown woman, while the irrational love he felt kept on growing in his heart, thanks to the even more irrational things he imagined; and so, still captivated by all the things he dreamed of, after crossing the bridge leading to the ruined Templar monastery, the moonstruck young man entered the intricate pathways of the gardens.

VI

The night was beautiful and serene; once again the moon was full, and it was shining with all its splendor in the highest part of the sky, while the wind was sighing with the sweetest of sounds through the leaves in the trees.

Manrique entered the cloister and then, extending his vision throughout the enclosure, he peered through the stone columns of the arcade... It was deserted.

He left it and directed his steps toward the grove that leads to the Duero; he had not yet entered it when a cry of jubilation escaped from his lips.

For an instant, he had seen the edge of a white dress float by and disappear, the white dress belonging to the woman of his dreams, the woman he loved so madly.

He immediately began running in hopes of finding her, until he reached the place where he had seen her disappear; but then, he suddenly stopped and fixed his astonished eyes on the ground, remaining there for a long moment; a nervous tremor began to spread through his body, a tremor which became stronger and stronger, until it threatened to become a convulsion, until he began to laugh madly, with a laughter that was loud, and strident, and distraught.

The white shape which floated for a moment before his eyes had become visible again, and this time he saw it right at his feet, but only for a moment.

It was a ray of moonlight, a ray of moonlight that passed through the leafy branches as they were moved by the wind.

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Several years had passed. Manrique was seated on a stool in front of the high stone arch of the gothic fireplace in his castle; he was motionless, with a mindless gaze that wandered nervously, and he paid no attention the caresses of his mother, or the attention of his servants.

“You are young and handsome,” the former insisted. “Why do you waste your life in solitude? Why don’t you look for a woman you could love, why don’t you look for a woman who could make you happy?”

“Love?... Love is only a ray of moonlight,” the young man answered.

“Why don’t you break out of this lethargy?” one of his squires asked him. “Gird yourself with armor from head to foot, order them to raise the banner of your noble family and let us march to war. In war, you can find glory.”

“Glory?... Glory is only a ray of moonlight.”

“Would you like to have us recite a ballad, the last one composed by Mosén Arnaldo, the Languedocian poet?”

“No! No!,” the young man exclaimed, rising angrily from his seat. “I don’t want anything... that is, yes... I want you to leave me alone... Ballads... women... glory... happiness... they’re all lies, vain fantasies we create with our imagination and then dress up with our whims, to fall in love with them and run after them, but for what?, for what? To find a ray of moonlight.”

Manrique was mad, or at least that was what everyone thought. But as for me, it is just the opposite; I think he had recovered his sanity.