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THE GRIMOIRE
(El Grimorio)

(If you are looking for a particular story in this book, you can find it by using Control f, and then filling in the title of the story.)

Part III

THE GENERAL MAKES A BEAUTIFUL CORPSE
(El General Hace un Lindo Cadaver)

Not long ago, in a town in South America whose name I would rather not mention, there was a fifty-year old surgeon who was so rich that he didn't have to work. During his free time, which was most of the year, he liked to read detective novels. He became so engrossed in his reading that he read almost all night long, and then did the same thing during the day. This way, because of getting so little sleep, and doing so much reading, he overworked his brain until he lost his mind. He was so affected by the fantasy of all the things he read in his books that he ended up with the strangest ideas any madman ever had; and because of the fact that in all of the novels he read the police always caught the criminal, he decided to commit a crime that was so perfect they would never know he was was the one who committed it.

Alfonso Quiroga—that was the name of our hero—had a strong body and agile legs, but his head was what controlled him; he was bald and wrinkled, he wore glasses for his short-sightedness, and he had a large grey moustache. He lived in a nice estate on the outskirts of town with no one but his servants. In the front were two separate houses. They looked similar, but inside the arrangement of the rooms was different; between them was a garage that was large enough for three cars. Quiroga was living in the one on the left, which was where he had practiced his profession. The one on the right had been uninhabited since his sisters died. In the rear of the garden was a whitewashed cottage where the irreplaceable cook, Bonifacia, an Indian who was now quite old, was living with her two children: Lucia, plump and attractive; Manuel, with his submissive wife. Behind the cottage was a thatched hut that was rented by two workers.

The servants and workers enjoyed the generosity and the kindness of doctor Quiroga, although they were often quite irritated when they saw him meddling with the upkeep of the estate. He sometimes pruned the fruit trees of the garden, applied pesticide to the plants, painted part of the fence, or went into the henhouse to get some eggs for his lunch. This was part of the physical exercise he had prescribed for himself, so as not to succumb to a sedentary life. He also did it out of love for the things in his estate. He even went into the kitchen to help Bonifacia with the cakes, tamales, and empanadas. But nothing pleased him more than reading the "mysteries" that came in the mail all the way from New York. In fact he had been reading *Dead and Not Buried* when, bored by the lack of imagination of H. F. M. Prescott, it occurred to Quiroga that not only would he be capable of writing a better novel, but that he would also be able to kill someone without

there being any detective in the world who would be able to prove that he was the one who had committed the crime.

He went up to his room and sat down on the balcony—it was that time at dusk when you couldn't see the stars yet, but you knew they were coming—and he spent some time formulating the plan of a perfect crime. The first thing, of course, was that nobody should ever be able to discover who was the killer. Nor why it was done. Or how it was done. Or what weapon was used. But that was still not enough. After all, there were hundreds of crimes like that. Hundreds? Yes! And that's not all. He was sure that ninety percent of the crimes that were committed never resulted in any punishment. They were, for the most part, crimes that were senseless, bogus, foolish, and stupid. Cruelties. Atrocities. These happen in every city. Bah! Filth from reprobates, and miscreants. No, a perfect crime should be an intellectual adventure. It requires the precise contexture of a charade. That's it! It has to be a masterwork. A disciplined and imaginative crime, like a sonnet. That's the point. And, like pure poetry, it must be unselfish. To kill for profit, for vengeance, for jealousy, for fear, for politics, for misanthropy, for euthanasia, would be to lose all the artistic possibilities of gratuitously cutting off someone's life. Killing for the joy of killing? Not that either. Not a homicidal maniac; those who are maniacal not only are unable to choose between good and bad, but are likely to have a relapse and do something again. A perfect crime must be done freely, only once. It must be done with no apparent motive, or egotism. A perfect murder must be sportsmanlike, and committed in cold blood, the way one accepts a bet. Strangling some poor fellow who is walking through a dark alley is something that thousands of criminals could do; usually the police never catch them. The proper way is to kill with style, leaving a personal stamp that creates the risk of being caught. That's the sporting part of it. Leave your mark on it, and still slip away. To remove someone in a way that is beautiful in itself, like a prestidigitation. To add to the beauty, one should create some difficult problems. For example, the problem of a corpse locked inside an impenetrable room, the problem of a corpse that disappears in the presence of many witnesses, the problem of a corpse that doesn't show the real weapon, but something unimaginable that created it... And other lesser problems: that of a series of killings that are committed according to a secret code; that of a murderer who advises the police when and where he will carry out his killing; that of an alibi that is false, but indestructible; that of tracks that appear in the middle of the road, without any apparent reason; that of a house that is impossible to locate; that of an ubiquitous man... And all of these problems must be solved with trigonometric elegance. Quiroga laughed slyly. Trigonometry. How nice! The triangle of the victim, the murderer, and the detective.

By now it had become dark, and in the clouds you could see the reflection of the lights of the city. Thousands and thousands of stars; and down here, thousands and thousand of people who in this instant are going and coming through the labyrinth of streets. One of these would be chosen for the sacrifice. One. Anyone. A man, or a woman? It doesn't matter. He would choose the victim by chance. Or, perhaps it would be better to say that chance will choose the victim. How? Well... he could throw the telephone book up in the air so that it would fall open on some page; then, with his eyes closed, he could place the end of the pencil over a name. No, no. The telephone book only gives the names of one social sector, most of them masculine. Would it be fair to leave out those who could not pay a telephone bill, or when it only gives the name for the head of the family? No,

definitely not. He would have to choose a more complex type of chance. In order to avoid the anti-democratic choice of the telephone book, he could use the names of saints whose festival is celebrated on different days of the year. Because the telephone book mentions the family name, and because the list of saints days on the calendar would give the first name. He took the calendar off the wall and went through the days in the stack of pages. Using his hand at random he pulled out the page of the 19th of March: San Jose. Then he wrote down all the letters of the alphabet on a sheet of paper. He went through them and chose the letter "M." Now things were progressing: "Jose M..." On other pages he wrote the numbers of the pages from the telephone book that had names with the letter M. He went through them. He chose one: page 387. He wrote a number for each column of names on the page; he took the second column. He counted the line of each column and wrote a number for each line; he took the number 9. Holding his breath, he let his finger slide down the list of names. The name on the ninth line of the second column of page 387 was Melgarejo; only there was no Jose Melgarejo. Good. That was okay; he would find him. Tomorrow morning he would begin the search. He laughed as though someone was tickling him. That would be some hunt! First he would hunt for the victim, then the detective would hunt for him. Ha, ha! Not bad, not bad! "Jose Melgarejo." Thirteen fateful letters. Who would it be? He finally went to bed. He slept like a log; but one of his dreams was that Jose Melgarejo did not exist.

Because, is it not obvious? Quiroga was deceiving himself. If all he wanted was to send someone to the other world, why go to all this effort? All he needed to do was to set his eyes on someone, and that was it. Wasn't that for the best? Yes! The fact is, that somewhere in the buried depth of his soul there was another part of Quiroga that wanted to let the unknown Jose Melgarejo stay unknown. But Quiroga was deceiving himself. He felt satisfied. Fate had chosen the name; and if Fate had not found the man, it was not his fault. When he saw that the phone book did not have a Jose Melgarejo, he was relieved, although he pretended not to feel that. Why did he reject the idea of going to the County Clerk's office to find out, once and for all, if there was a Jose Melgarejo or not? He persuaded himself it was because he didn't want to give himself away. But the real reason was something else; he was afraid he would find that the man was still alive.

No matter what it was, the fact is that Quiroga continued with his preparations for the perfect crime. How, when, where, and with what, he still didn't know. When he met up with the victim, he would worry about all that. With the threads of circumstances, he would weave his plot. The first thing he had to do was destroy his collection of police novels; it wouldn't do to have someone stick his nose in the cake and smell the frosting. And he must surround his life with a halo of innocence. Better yet, transform his whole life into a colossal alibi. Without exaggerating, or calling attention to new habits, he had to transform his reputation—which was still irreproachable—so that whatever happened, nobody would be able to accuse him. Being a member of the Latin American upper class would help him. He was well-regarded in influential social groups as a man of order, who was rich, conservative, and refined. (His madness was internal and secret.) If there was something that was visible, it was only some eccentricities. And who was going to notice them? These days, the whole country was upside down, and the suckers were always very gullible, so who was going to be surprised by some opinions Quiroga expressed from his easy chair in the Club. Inoffensive opinions too. And his newspaper articles? Just consider the topics: folklore, genealogy, patriotic events... No problem,

since everyone respected him. There were even local politicians who were considering Doctor Quiroga as a possible candidate for the Nationalist Party. He smiled at that. Him, a politician? What an idea! That would never happen. But still, he savored the thought. His personality added a perverse pleasure to his macabre fantasies; if they did catch him after his crime, he would fall like Sampson, holding on to the pillars of society.

One afternoon the Capital resonated with the sound of the Cavalry marching through the city. Sometime after that it was announced on the radio that an Army Junta lead by General Veintimilla was going to conduct an operation that, hopefully, would save the country from some problems I no longer remember. The Nationalists encouraged the Army, offered their support to the General, and tried to solicit some public employees. Then, the generous soul of Doctor Quiroga became more admired than ever. He gave advice, he attended party meetings, he gathered support, he wrote editorials for the paper, and he modestly kept out of sight. Once someone asked him: "Doctor Quiroga, if you would like to..." Don't even mention it. The Doctor did not want to. He didn't want anything. He would never accept a paid government job.

Then, suddenly, a new leader appeared; he was a general who had just returned from the Italy of Mussolini after several years as a military attaché at the Embassy. He met in secret with the leaders of the regiments, and one morning the newspapers published a story with the title "Vientemilla Resigns." "A new Junta names General Jose Melgarejo as its leader."

There was such a jolt in Quiroga's heart that it felt like another person had inhabited his body. His head began to spin, and he almost was able to recover the sanity he had lost. Jose Melgarejo! He looked at himself in the mirror. His image was distraught and haggard. He and his image looked at each other and spoke with the same movement of their lips: "He has appeared." He felt ashamed for being so cowardly and, with the irrationality of a fanatic, he plunged into the adventure. He had to work out a plan for the crime. And the first step was to make contact with the victim.

That was not difficult. He even went so far as turning down several invitations of the Nationalists to visit the Leader. Then, he finally accepted and met him in a closed-door meeting of soldiers and politicians. Jose Melgarejo was short in stature, with small hands, pale skin, and with a kind of feminine plumpness; but the look of his face showed that he had the character of a leader. Quiroga did not feel attracted by his appearance, however; right away he already envisioned him as a dead body, with his eyes closed. He certainly would make a beautiful corpse! Quiroga was careful with what he said in the discussions. He was invited to several more meetings. And all that time, what he said sounded completely sane. Quiroga's seriousness seemed patriotic; in fact, it was the determination of a traitor. All this made a positive impression on Melgarejo. Once Melgarejo invited him by himself. They spoke about the crisis. The military government had been discredited; how could they rebuild its popularity? Quiroga proposed that, in one way or another, they should find a way to give everyone some money. Great. Fantastic. Nobody had ever thought of that. And if he, Melgarejo, were to give the good news in a speech on the State Radio? Yes, that would be a good start. However, Doctor Quiroga would have to write the speech. Okay. Yes. Doctor Quiroga would write it.

So Quiroga had access to the General's office, and soon he was coming and going like it was his own home. He turned down an offer to be the Director-General, and the sign of his modesty made Melgarejo give him even more esteem. After that they became friends.

Sometimes Melgarejo invited him to his home. Other times it was Quiroga who invited him to enjoy one of the meals prepared by Bonifacia. One night, while he was dining in Quiroga's house, Melgarejo showed that he was quite worried about the growing strength of the opposition.

"Everything the government does has to appear as though it is legal," Quiroga insisted. "It would be best to hold an election, so that you could become President."

"But what if they don't elect me?"

"Of course they are going to elect you! You know how these things work. There is no reason to worry. The opposition has to be made to look bad. A little dirty work... In the worst case, you would still be here and, no matter what happens, it will be no different from what it is now."

An election campaign was organized. Quiroga worked with Melgarejo all the time. He gave repeated indications of loyalty. When someone shot at him while they were traveling on the train, he covered him with his body. He stood up for him when some of the army chiefs began to mutiny. Other politicians helped him, confident that Doctor Quiroga had no personal ambitions, and that he did not oppose their ambitions. The only reluctant politicians were in remote provinces.

"Just leave it to me," Quiroga said. "I will invite them to my house for a fiesta with wine, empanadas, roast lamb, sponge cakes, and... folklore! You can give them a short speech. They will go back to their home turf full of enthusiasm. Just leave it to me."

The day before the fiesta—Saturday—Melgarejo and Quiroga spent the entire day in the Government Office. They left at dusk. In the lobby the aide-de-camp, Major Rosas, joined them. "Ah, so his assistant will also spend the night in my house," Quiroga said to himself. "Okay, rather than following plan 1, I will follow plan 2, or plan 3, whichever seems best." They got into the general's official car and left. In the city, which was always active at night, thousands of eyes watched them. However, in the suburbs they went through a park as dark as a forest of trees, with only one open eye: the lake. They left the park behind. On the side of the road, there were a few small houses. After that, open country. Another cluster of houses with a small Baroque church, and in another five minutes, they arrived at Doctor Quiroga's estate. They passed through the gates, said goodbye to the chauffeur, and entered the main house. After supper, Quiroga took out some papers and began to make notes about the next day's meeting.

"You can retire if you want," the General said to his Aide. "Doctor Quiroga and I will be working late. Tomorrow at eleven... No, at eleven-thirty, come and get instructions."

"Wait," Quiroga interceded like a host who tries his best not to give his guests less than they deserve; "the other house only has one furnished room, so, if you don't mind, you both can stay here. The Major can stay in my room. I will show you where it is. Your room is ready, General. When we finish, I will go to the other house."

"By no means," Melgarejo said, "the Major can sleep in the other house, and we will both stay here! Why shouldn't you stay in your own room? The Major will be just fine in the other house. Isn't that right?"

"Of course," the Major replied.

"All right. Whatever you want," Quiroga said. And he thought to himself, "So I will have to use plan number 3."

They said goodnight. Quiroga and the Major left, they walked through the garage, and entered the adjoining house. After the Major was settled in, Quiroga returned to the

General and they began to share ideas. Quiroga took notes and hid his impatience. There was only a half hour before the perfect crime! He had made all the plans in advance. Plan number 3. Everything was in place, and the time for each action calculated minute by minute. The placement of people was anticipated in spite of the incongruity. His alibi was perfect. In his imagination he had gone through all the different stages of the crime; in his imagination the General was already dead. He knew what precautions to take in order to not leave a trail. Now, before actually carrying out the murder, he contemplated in his mind, for the last time, the plan of the crime. Impeccable. Perfect. Nothing was missing, not even the challenge to the police. Because, in fact, he had created an enormous mystery. It couldn't possibly be more challenging. A fair game. There would be enough loose ends to spur some interested investigator. This golden collection of mysteries would be recorded forever in the annals of the police.

When the servants and the retainers retired to their bungalow in the rear of the garden it was nine thirty, and they saw the house was lit up. There they were still working.

Then it was Sunday. Seven o'clock in the morning. When she got up, Bonifacia found Doctor Quiroga in the patio, hanging a large portrait of General Melgarejo on one of the walls. The smiling portrait looked like an ad for toothpaste.

"Charming. That's the General, isn't it?" Bonifacia said.

"Yes it is."

"Is he still sleeping?"

"Like a log."

"Should I prepare breakfast?"

"For me, no thanks. I have already eaten. In a little while, I will go and see if Major Rosas is awake. If he is, I will let you know, and you can have Lucia take him breakfast. But watch out for Lucia! Ha, ha! The Major probably has a sharp eye for pretty girls... But don't worry about the General; he is going to sleep late. When he wakes up, I will let you know, Bonifacia. We'll have to work fast. Have Manuel prepare the lamb, and light a fire. And you be sure not to lose sight of me. You know, today we are going to have to maintain our reputation as chefs! And the salsa, Bonifacia; be careful with the salsa! I already tried one of the sponge cakes... they are great! And I don't have to tell you about the dough for the empanadas. I'm sure they'll be fine. I hope the filling is just as good. Let me know how they are once you have tried them. Now you can start preparing the empanadas. And Teresa?"

"She went to Mass."

"That's fine. When she gets back, have her put on the dress that I bought for her. The same for Lucia. Have them set the table. Oh, and make sure Lucia doesn't arouse the guests, okay? Ha, ha! That girl is just too pretty for her own good. I will let you know, Bonifacia, when it's time to start heating things up. And when the musicians get here, be sure they are given something to drink. Now, what else...? I guess that's all for now. No, nothing more, that's all.

In back of the house, between the garden and the fountain, they arranged the chairs for the musicians. The patio was crowded when they brought in an arbor with jasmines—where they set up the tables—and then it was clear again when they left and headed toward the garden. The servants came and took part in the sacrifice of the lamb. Teresa arrived and put on the skirt—pink and yellow—as Quiroga had ordered. Then, the musicians and dancers arrived, and they dressed in traditional costumes. Finally, Lucia

came with her new skirt, which was violet and yellow. Major Rosas arrived wearing many different colors and looking quite satisfied, as he twisted his moustache and gave the feel of a Viennese opera to this Hispanic celebration.

“Doctor Quiroga,” he said, “It’s time now. I’m going to get my instructions from the General.”

“The General? I haven’t seen him yet. Is it eleven?”

“It’s already eleven thirty.”

They both went to the guest room, and Quiroga knocked on the door respectfully. No one answered, so he knocked harder. Still nothing. Then, he turned to Major Rosas and said, laughing:

“It must have really affected him. Last night he couldn’t sleep so he took a sleeping draught. Shall we wake him up?”

But they couldn’t open the door.

“General!” the major shouted. He jerked on the door handle. He shouted again, this time bringing his mouth closer to the lock. He tried to look through the keyhole.

“Yes, I see,” Quiroga said. And he added, laughing again: “Can you hear how he’s snoring? We’re not going to wake him up, even with cannon shots!”

In fact, the steady and slow, deep breathing of the sleeper was audible

“Is there another door?”

“No. But the room has a window that looks out on the patio. Let’s go there and give it a try.”

They walked back through the hall and went out on a porch, from which you could see the patio and the arbor, then they walked over to the window. It was closed and locked with a bolt from the inside. A thick curtain was pulled across it so it was not possible to see inside the room.

“I guess we’re out of luck. There is a skylight in the back of the room, but it’s quite high up and, besides, it’s so small we wouldn’t even be able to stick our head through it. There is nothing we can do, so let’s wait. Let’s give him another hour. If he doesn’t wake up by the time the guests arrive,” he started laughing again, “we will break down the door and shake him till he comes around. He must have doubled the dose of the prescription I gave him.”

At five minutes after twelve, three automobiles full of people arrived. The waitresses started serving vermouth. The guitars and the drums began to play vidalas and sambas. People gathered in groups and began animated conversations. Quiroga asked them to excuse him for not being able to be with everyone. He traveled from one side to the other, always cheerful and attentive. Once he went into the house, but the guests didn’t miss him. Another round of vermouths was served by the pretty Lucia. A quarter to one. The dancers performed a Chilean dance. Quiroga went up to the Major and said:

“So, how’s it going? Do you like the dances?”

“A lot,” the Major answered. And after a moment of silence, he asked: “Have you still not seen the General?”

“No. He must still be sleeping.”

“Don’t you think we ought to go and tell him everyone has arrived?”

“Yes, of course. What am I thinking! What time is it?”

“A quarter past one.”

“Already? How fast time passes! Of course, we have to call the General. Lets go.”

They went to the guest room and knocked. No answer. The Major pressed the door handle, and this time it moved. Except that when it opened the General wasn't there. The bed was unmade, the sheets were wrinkled, the pillow was sunken. The key was in the lock. Evidently, the General had gotten dressed and left the bedroom. They looked in the bathroom but he wasn't there either. Bonifacia, the only person beside the Doctor who had been in the house, had not seen anything.

"Where can he have gone?" Quiroga asked. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" the Major said.

"Nothing. I'll tell you later."

Quiroga took the Major by the arm, and they searched through all the other rooms. Still nothing. The General had evidently left. They went out into the garden, but he wasn't there either. The chauffeur was still waiting in the official car and he told them, no, he had not seen the General.

"How strange!" the Major exclaimed. "Where can he have gone?"

"Perhaps, when we were looking outside, he went back inside. Maybe he is already talking to the guests. Let's go see."

"Where could he have gone?" the Major wondered.

"Could he have gone to Mass?" Quiroga asked, without conviction.

"No, I doubt that... Earlier, you said "unless..."

"Nothing, nothing, we'll talk about that later. Right now I have to attend to the guests. For now, let's tell the others that the General had to leave for some urgent matter. He'll probably be back soon."

At one thirty people sat down at the table. Bonifacia and the girls brought plates with empanadas just out of the frying pan. Wine was poured. "Long live General Melgarejo!" The frugal Quiroga went to see if the roast was ready and, on the way, he asked the musicians to play a carnalito. After the empanadas, the roast lamb was served. Then, it was the sponge cakes and fruit... The Major look at Quiroga questioningly. "So what are we going to do?" It was not possible to wait any longer. The dancers had finished, they had removed the plates, and Bonifacia served the coffee. Doctor Quiroga stood up, he waited for people to become silent, and he began to explain. He said he was sorry for the involuntary absence of General Melgarejo, and he then began to lavish him with praises. With great deceptiveness, he chose the words so that his speech sounded simultaneously like a panegyric, and a funeral oration. No one else noticed his funereal subtlety, and Quiroga smiled when he heard them shouting, "Long live the General, long live the General," which now had no meaning. Other speeches were made, each one was more eloquent. The after-dinner talk came to an end, and the party was over. Everyone left; everyone but Major Rosas.

"You must be exhausted, Doctor Quiroga; but would you permit me to take advantage of a little more of your hospitality?"

"My goodness, of course! By all means. Whatever you want. Consider yourself at home here."

"Thank you. I would also like to use your telephone to find out if the General has gone home, or if he has gone back to his Government Office."

No good. No one knew where the General was.

"Doesn't that seem strange?" the Major asked, after he had hung up the phone. "I can not understand how the General could have gone without saying anything, or without

telling you... I remember that you were about to say something. You said 'Unless...' What were you going to say?"

"All right. When you see him, the General will be able to explain why he left better than I can. It's just that last night, after several hours of taking notes, and then throwing them away, he became irritated. He told me he was irritated by the idea of this fiesta. I don't know... It had entered his mind that it was humiliating for him to have to lower himself to this... He said he didn't need to try and get the support of any politicians... That after all, he was acting with the authority of the army and didn't need these electoral farces... He also insinuated he might leave without telling anyone. And he said he was so tired of struggling with problems he couldn't solve, that he felt like sending it all to hell, giving up the government, and going somewhere else, where he could take things easier, and do what he liked... Those were his words, and I laughed when I heard them and didn't try to contradict him. He was very agitated. I suppose that is why he asked me for a soporific in order to sleep. Of course, I never really believed he would do what he threatened. But, the rest you already know; when we opened the door and found that the General had left, I suspected he had carried out his threat."

"But if that is the case, where did he go? And how? He didn't have a car, so he would have had to go on foot. Walk down the road on foot, at midnight? I don't believe that."

"Well, what if he decided to walk over to the Church? And what if he walked from there to the park?"

"All I can say, Doctor Quiroga, is that I don't believe that. So I think all we can do is wait. There is something very strange here. If you don't mind, I would like to take another look at the General's room."

So they went there. The room was still in disarray. The Major looked at everything: at the night table, at a lamp plugged into an outlet from the basement, and the flask with the sleeping draught. Above the wall opposite the door was a small skylight that was half opened. The curtains were drawn back, but the window was still locked.

The next day, the Major came back again.

"I'm afraid there is some dirty work here," he told Quiroga after informing him that the General hadn't shown up anywhere. "A kidnapping, a crime, I don't know..."

"Yes, something bad must have happened," Quiroga agreed. "I don't suppose you think he could have had a mental breakdown, or amnesia, and left because of that..."

"No, how could I believe that. Is that what you think?"

"Frankly, no."

"All right. Then, we have to get to work. Would you let me search the estate and question the servants? It's not that I want to act like Sherlock Holmes..."

For Quiroga, the mention of the magical name of Sherlock Holmes had the virtue of lending to Major Rosas the abilities of the detective himself: the miracle-worker, transmigrated, and revived. "Ah," he said to himself, "So Major Rosas is one of mine." He never thought the detective would show up so soon. Nor that it would be a detective like the ones in novels. There were detectives who were addicted to morphine, cynical, or blind, with skirts, with cassocks, and doctors, journalists, lawyers, and art critics... How nice! The collection was complete; Major Rosas, an army detective... And, quite pleased, he saw in the eyes of Major Rosas the talent for analysis and deduction. Now he would see if the methods of Sherlock Holmes were infallible.

On Monday Major Rosas asked Quiroga to accompany him to the Government Office.

The commission set up to consider the emergency wanted to hear from him. Without hesitation, Quiroga gave them all the information they asked for. "Yes," he said, "it is possible that it was a kidnapping. If the General walked to the church on foot, a group of opponents who were watching our house that night might have carried him off in a car. In that case, it is likely that they are holding him captive some place."

The Chief of Police, who was one of those who were present, hardly listened to him. Quiroga was alarmed by his lack of interest.

Tuesday, at three in the afternoon the commission, including the Chief of Police, Major Rosas, and Doctor Quiroga, met again. The situation was heating up. The General had become an issue. And if the opposition found out he was gone? How long could they keep it secret? Doctor Quiroga suggested that the police should go to his house and check everything, and that they should interrogate all those who were present at the fiesta... One of the military officers said that would be done and, turning to the Chief of Police, he told him he should take charge of the investigation.

The Chief of Police picked up his hat, and his saber, and said to Quiroga:

"Shall we go, Doctor?"

"Yes, let's go," Quiroga answered; and turning to Major Rosas, he said "shall we go?" wanting to include him also so that he would come along and be part of the investigation. He felt that Major Rosas, and nobody else should be the detective. The Chief of Police? Quiroga was convinced that he was inept, and he would make a mess of the investigation. It was the Major who had the know-how. He was the only one who was capable of connecting one clue with another, and using that logical sequence like a telescope. Just a trace, a tiny bit of the crime, and the Major could see it and solve the enigma. And if he didn't solve it, what greater tribute could be paid to Quiroga's mastery? Quiroga wanted to combat the most capable. One master-mind against another master-mind; this is what was still lacking in his real-life novel. And that was why he wanted to ask the Major, the expert, the sleuth, to come along. And the Major did come.

But then, what Quiroga was afraid of happened. Soon, the Chief of Police created a catastrophe and began to arrest politicians from the Opposition and raid the places where they had been meeting. On his advice, the army did the same thing with the officers who had opposed Melgarejo. And, as you might expect, that let the cat out of the bag and by the end of the week everyone knew that Melgarejo had disappeared. The Opposition went to the streets. They distributed revolutionary flyers. They papered the walls with posters criticizing the government. There were strikes. Students vociferated. There was gunfire; people were killed. One unit of the army took advantage of the confusion and tried to stage a coup d'etat. The new commander, General Villa, announced from the balcony of the Government Office that the regime of Melgarejo had ended, and it was necessary to take some extreme measures so the country would be safe. People shouted "Viva General Villa!" Someone in a café insinuated that General Villa had probably ordered the removal of Melgarejo. Another said the conjecture was valid. Someone else said there hadn't been a duel with sabers, but with pistols; and it was not a duel but an act of courage. It was said that Villa entered the Government Office and liquidated Melgarejo with a finger, a finger on the trigger. General Villa became a national hero. Flattered, he denied nothing, and said nothing. Overnight they banished Major Rosas and sent him to the Embassy in Madrid, which supported the idea that Villa had fired a shot at Melgarejo. If not, why did they send away his personal assistant? The police thought it

was wise not to discuss the matter. They didn't want to create an uncontrollable situation by accident. The disappearance of Melgarejo had become a state secret. The newspapers didn't dare to mention it. When General Villa proclaimed amnesty, his supporters took that as a Law of Oblivion, and they believed it meant that Villa wanted the whole thing to be forgotten. So Melgarejo was forgotten.

Quiroga was furious: "Numbskulls!" What the devil, that is no way to handle things. In the first place, they stripped the glory of the investigation from his crime. The police brushed it under the rug before the jigsaw puzzle was even put together. Blunderers! The beauty of a murder is in defeating all the best efforts of the police without revealing anything. But if the police don't even try to solve it, what purpose is served by the effort to create a perfect crime? What a stupid country! In no other place would the police retreat from the green carpet, leaving the killer comfortably sitting there, with all the aces in his hand. Ignoring the Melgarejo case was like tossing a jewel in the garbage, putting it with all the other mundane crimes that would never be solved, not because they were unsolvable, but because the authorities are indifferent. Perhaps right now Major Rosas was bragging that if he hadn't been removed, he would have solved the mystery. Yes, it was quite possible that Major Rosas had a suspicion. Why not? The tremendous conjuring trick of Melgarejo's disappearance must have created suspicions. He had counted on the probability that they would suspect him. He even relished the idea that he would be suspected. But would Major Rosas have been able to find a loose thread in the marvelous tapestry of his crime? No, that would not have been possible. Quiroga was sure of his mastery. How amusing it would have been to be confronted with the suspicions of Major Rosas and then deflate them—bim, bam, boom—into pinpricks! Unverifiable suspicions. Perhaps, after many, many years when he was close to death he would call that Sherlock Holmes and he would toy with him, like a cat with a mouse. "Do you remember the day of the fiesta?" he would ask him, after he had humiliated him; "do you remember when we went to the guest room? Well, at that moment General Melgarejo no longer existed, not even as a *corpus delicti*." "Really? But that can't be! Do you mean to tell me that the General did not die in bed? Wait! I thought..." "Yes, yes, I know... Generals usually die in bed; but General Melgarejo never got in that bed. I rumbled the sheets to make it look like he had slept there." "But what about the snoring we heard?" "Oh, that was just an audio tape. The room was empty, my friend." "But it was locked from inside," Major Rosas would insist, without being able to understand. Quiroga would smile smugly, and say: "Elementary, Rosas, elementary." He would tell him how he left the skylight open but locked the window, how he locked the door from outside but took out the key and went to the back wall, how he put the key in the crack of a bamboo cane, how he stuck the cane through the skylight and placed the key in the lock. Not being able to hide his admiration, the Major would say: "Now I understand; using the same tricks in reverse, you recovered the key and opened the door to make me think that the General had left the room. Doctor, you are a genius! Of course, nobody missed you since the fiesta was in the patio, and it was natural that you would be moving around a lot... Yes, you're a genius." "Thanks, good friend; now you understand why, in order to keep the secret, it will be necessary to kill you. I'm sorry," Quiroga sighed. A genius? Okay... Why deny it? In fact he *was* a genius. But his brilliant masterwork was crumbling. Not only had they taken away the satisfaction of measuring forces with justice and defeating it, but they had also taken away the murder. Now General Villa was

the criminal. They had stolen his fame. Villa was probably a good-for-nothing who was incapable of killing fly, and there he was on a pedestal, swaggering with someone else's talent like some historical South American hero, decorated with the enthralling color of blood. More: by stealing his crime, Villa had degraded him. Quiroga had committed it without any antipathy, with purity and disinterest; but in public opinion this killing had now been turned into a tyrannicide. He was so angry he wanted go to the Main Square and shout to the four winds, "The murder is mine! It was me, I was the only killer!" And they would arrest him. And he would meticulously make a confession. And the next day the papers would publish it with huge headlines. And the expression of surprise on their faces! He laughed just to think about it. Because in the good detective novels, even those that are not so good, the passion for abstract problems imposes a careful restraint on the description of a murder. These novels never give a feeling of repugnance. But the detached style of the newspaper writer makes the reader's emotions burn in a red rage. The newspapers definitely can cause repulsion. In *The Republic* you would read: "Once Major Rosas returned to the adjoining house, the clever Doctor Alfonso Quiroga administered an anesthetic to Melgarejo; and when he lost consciousness, he removed his clothes, he bound his arms and legs to avoid any hemorrhaging, he placed him in the bathtub, he turned on the water to wash away the blood before it coagulated, and then he began to dismember him with the expertise of a surgeon. Melgarejo passed away during this delicate surgical operation. He removed the viscera, he amputated the head, and he divided the body in four pieces. From the meaty parts he severed several pounds of flesh. The rest he wrapped in a waterproof fabric and carried it into the kitchen where he turned on the gas under a copper melting pot with a solution of caustic soda and water. First, he boiled the head, and then the limbs and the loose pieces. After the proteins and the fat dissolved, he used pincers to remove the bones; he washed them in the sink and then cut them up. In a pot he heated nitric acid and dissolved the bones with the smoke going out of the chimney. When he removed the acid, he took care to mix it with a great deal of water so when he poured it in the sink it wouldn't corrode the pipes. He disintegrated the clothes in the solution of caustic soda. He cleaned his instruments and put them in their place..." Yes, it would be something like that. How shocked they would be when they read this in *The Republic*. Even the newspaper's black ink would have a deleterious odor. And the nocturnal hours of the scene. Sublime, absolutely sublime... What a classic model! But he would never confess. That would be insane. By confessing, he would not gain anything. That way he would destroy the only merit that that he still had; it should never be known who had eviscerated Melgarejo, or how it was done. And besides, if he confessed, they would probably appoint him minister. Because that was the way things were done in this country; you couldn't even commit a decent crime without being considered a hero. What a shame! Such a beautiful crime, and so well executed... The butchery of the last military revolution had removed from Melgarejo's disappearance the horror of death, and the fun of playing with death. A vast conspiracy of politicians, the military, newspaper writers, police, charlatans and cowards had invented a patriotic motive that dishonored the selflessness of the murder. I hope lightning strikes them! Why are detective novels written in English? Is it because only in civilized countries there is an aversion to violent death? Or is it because all of the detective novels are fallacious? A mental game, like a mathematician who writes out his formula, knowing that he will never come across anything like that; or irresponsible like a chess player who

checkmates a wooden chess piece on a checkerboard. In these novels the criminal does everything he can to secure his crime like an airtight chamber, with a chain of causes and effects that are tightly linked together. But this type of order, wasn't it false? This order which is opposed to life; a life that is only an absurd chaos. Now Quiroga scorned those novels. He was happy he had destroyed them. He swore he would never read another one.

Little by little he began to calm down. It wasn't his fault that the skillful project of his crime had ended in an anticlimax; they had made it roll down the stairs grotesquely into the basement. Yes, it had fallen down, but both he and God knew that the crime had been perfect. A crime of sacred symbolism, with the splendor of holy liturgy. He took the several pounds of flesh he had cut off and passed it through the meat grinder. He fried the ground meat, and he seasoned it and mixed it with hardboiled eggs, olives and raisins. By now it was almost seven o'clock in the morning. He took it, and had Bonifacia stuff it into the empanadas. The politicians shouting "Viva Melgarejo" in a mystical communion of faith, devoured the empanadas a Melgarejo. Just great, really great! If only there were criminologists worthy of a crime like this! With resignation, Quiroga devoutly raised his eyes to heaven. Something of the innocent splendor that must have illumined the face of Cain after Abel's demise, also glowed on Quiroga's face. "God and I," he said again, "know that, in spite of everything, the crime was perfect." And rounded like a holy consecrated wafer, he offered his crime to God, the only silent witness.

THE NORTH AMERICAN WOMAN

Miss Emma Winthrop was the last descendant of a puritan family of Boston whose origin was lost during the seventeenth century. In fact, it was lost in 1665, in a terrible fire that destroyed the Winthrop's house, and with it, the family Bible that contained the names of several different generations. And, evidently, Emma Winthrop intended to reignite the fire of a historical family tradition: the fire of scandal. "She is capable of anything," her mother once complained in 1920, "even marrying an Irish policeman from Brooklyn." And if only that was all! Marrying an Irish policeman would have been quite respectable, even if he was from Brooklyn. The truth is that Emma Winthrop had no intention of marrying; she had many love affairs. She was one of those wild women from the *Roaring Twenties*, a *Flame of Youth* from a novel of F. Scott Fitzgerald, or a movie with Clara Bow. While she was in college, she had a baby that died after a few days. Nobody knew about it, not even the father of the child. She had a graceful figure which showed her flesh like the curves of a sculpture. She could have served as a model for all of the different styles that she had adopted, from the armistice of 1918 until the new war in 1939. What did it matter if the skirts got shorter? So what if the neckline was lower? What about the waist, the bodice, and so on? No matter how Emma Winthrop dressed, she always had a statuesque figure. Other women of the same age looked older wearing the style of clothes that was popular during the years of World War II. But not Emma Winthrop. She copied the boldness of Hollywood actresses, and her figure showed an amazing youthful vigor. Some men, looking at her furtively, and imagined how she would look naked. Others didn't need to imagine anything, because she didn't mind being naked. It is not that she was a loose woman. She charmed the men of her country,

she flirted with men from abroad, but she only went to bed with those who were eloquent, who were easiest to charm. It doesn't mean that she was guilty of nymphomania, or lust. She could have lived chastely. In fact, she lived much more chastely than a woman who was well married. Her great love had been the first man who gave her a baby. After that, she was never really in love with anyone. She was rather cold and intellectual. What she liked was hearing men express their desire. Her coquetry usually had a rather scientific methodology. She scrutinized the man, and with the happiness of a chemist who found effervescence in his test tube and saw the expected reactions occur: the man's eyes got cloudy, his face turned red, his legs tried to take a deceptive posture, and he was tense and trembling as he approached her... Then Emma Winthrop pressed the man to speak. That was what really moved her: pure loquacity. That was the main condition: the man must be eloquent. If not, nothing. When her lover was totally submissive and servile, she charitably offered her body, like someone who offers the prize of her virtue.

In October of 1929 the economic edifice of the United States collapsed. The crisis, which spread to the rest of the world, consumed the fortune of the Winthrop family. For many years Emma Winthrop had been able to enjoy life. She traveled to France, Italy, and Spain. But all of a sudden she found herself unable to travel. After that came the "New Deal" of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, together with the "Good Neighbor Policy." In the United States they began to talk about their "friends" in Mexico, Cuba, Peru, and Argentina. The rumba, the tango, and the conga became popular. People adorned their clothing, and their houses, with trinkets reminiscent of the Aztecs and the Incas. People learned to speak Spanish. Then there was Pearl Harbor, and the Second World War began. During the war Emma Winthrop was unable to travel to Europe, so she decided to visit some remote corner of Latin America. She chose Argentina. She found out that they needed an English teacher at the Normal School of San Luis. She took a plane and got off in Mendoza; there she got on a train and one September afternoon she arrived at San Luis.

She went to a hotel, took a bath and, with her bare skin under a kimono, she went out on the balcony where the wind began to dry her.

(A hotel servant, hidden in an attic, spied on her.)

The next morning Emma came down the stairs dressed in green. From the vestibule, Doctor Felipe Cruz saw her descending. He hoped that when she arrived this statuesque woman would turn out to be shorter. But when Emma finally stood next to Doctor Cruz, she seemed taller than ever.

Dr. Cruz, a professor of mathematics, and the Director of the Normal School, was a mestizo who was short, stout, and knock-kneed, with his round head buried between his shoulders. He had the large hands of a blacksmith, a mop of wiry black hair, and the demeanor of a draft horse. Through the two open cracks in the stone of his face an intelligent gaze looked out: with this same gaze doctor Cruz had captured the sympathy of Einstein when, after his lecture in the University of Buenos Aires in 1924, they had spoken about one of the formulas in chalk, scribbled like a dead spider on the surface of a blackboard. Emma only saw an ugly Indian, who was impassive and humble. With an expression of congeniality, which was actually an expression of racial superiority, she greeted him with an exaggerated smile.

"Miss Winthrop? Very happy to meet you. I am Felipe Cruz. I want to welcome you, in my name, and in that of all the professors."

They left the hotel and started walking toward the school. They traveled through the deserted streets of San Luis, the man short and stocky dressed in black, the tall woman dressed in green, the man hardly speaking, while the woman was chatting and laughing like a cicada maddened by the sun.

In the patio there was a group of professors, some men, and others women.

“Oh, there comes Doctor Cruz with the North American woman.”

“What a chatterbox!”

“Molinari, what a thing to say!” one of the women scolded him, but still feeling like laughing, since they were all young and the patio was full of students. And through that sea of youthful faces, Miss Emma Winthrop traveled like a figurehead that was antiquated, towering, and modestly arrogant.

Emma greeted everyone with smiles and laughter; even the light seemed to tickle her. She knew that her mistakes in Spanish were amusing them. Everyone seemed to like her, so they decided to gather and lavish their attention on her.

“Hey, what a dish this lady is,” Molinari commented. “Very cheerful, no? She has a stupendous body, and what a face!”

(Her face was not ugly: perhaps too bony, perhaps her mouth was too large. But it's true that her face did not fit very well with the rounded perfection with which this female vine was climbing.)

In those days the government was in charge of setting up schools in the entire country. But who was going to teach? The provinces were not prepared. It was necessary to improvise teaching staffs. So professors who had recently graduated from Buenos Aires descended into the provinces like locusts. That included the young teachers from the Normal School in San Luis. They knew their material, but they had achieved their professorship so suddenly that they still had the spirit of students. The fact that they were all from Buenos Aires gave them a feeling of adventure, and lessened their sense of responsibility. They also had the same feeling of disrespect, so typical of Buenos Aires, for the interior provinces. To them San Luis seemed especially strait-laced and boring, so they were all willing to use any possible opportunity to amuse themselves. In this case, Emma Winthrop was the opportunity.

They reserved a party room in the Park Café, and there they set up banquet tables. There were lights, flowers, and on the white tablecloths, there were drinks. There was a phonograph with tangos. At the head table was Emma Winthrop.

Doctor Cruz had been obliged to attend; he was the Director, and he couldn't miss a celebration of camaraderie. But he didn't enjoy banquets. Especially those that tended to end in drunkenness. He was from San Luis, and he knew that in San Luis they were not fond of people from Buenos Aires. He didn't have anything against them personally; and he also had been educated in Buenos Aires. But if these teachers from Buenos Aires didn't restrain their impertinent cliquish habits, it would give San Luis a bad reputation. The Church was already alarmed. There were fathers who feared for their children. The older families were offended because they were not able to intervene. So Doctor Cruz was there to keep an eye on things. To make sure all that was done took place behind closed doors, and that the juvenile uproar did not move out into the street.

Emma did not know that there were two different social mindsets, and she adapted at once to the only one she saw. She adapted with the quickness of a bird who, when it sees that it is surrounded by other birds with the same plumage, ignores the fact that it is

encaged. She danced and sang, and since she was quite drunk, she toyed with love. Molinari was her partner in the game: a chatterbox like her, outgoing like her, but much younger than she was. This meant that they flirted with each other, knowing that it didn't mean anything. They played with love, but were too drunk to really be in love. Good humor in the middle of the night, and nothing more.

"Miss Emma, Miss Emma," he called her from the other end of the hall, pronouncing it "Mishima" and wiggling his fingers like someone who is calling a cat. And "Mishima" ran up to him, like a pampered cat, but as big as a panther. And hugging him in order to begin dancing, she shouted at him:

"Oh, Molinari, you are marvelous; I like you so much."

Then they laughed, and so did everyone else.

Everyone began to be charmed by this tipsy woman. They also felt respect, because they saw that Miss Emma was like an autumn that was still green and lively in a forest that has had a good life and wants to keep on thriving.

All had become quite lively, some more, and some less. Emma was unstoppable, but Molinari began to stumble, stammer, and talk nonsense. He finally had to sit down. After that, Tota Chavez, a Professor of Geography, smeared butter on his face, and with a table knife she pretended to shave him. Molinari let her keep doing it. By now his voice was as pasty and mellow as the butter; it was also sad, because he was remembering what it had been like when he was a child. Sometime later, a history professor and a language professor took poor Molinari, one by his arms and the other by his legs, and they rocked him gently, while they invited Doctor Cruz to join the fun. Doctor Cruz said impassively:

"No, some other time. I think it's getting late and it would be better if we called things off, don't you think?"

They protested: "No, no, not yet! It's still early! A little later, maybe. The fun part is just starting..."

With an understanding smile on his face of stone, Doctor Cruz stood up and tried to get them to leave. By now the party was just one step away from an orgy. He wasn't worried about morality; the reputation of the school was what bothered him. They had had enough fun. Anything they did now would make them ashamed tomorrow when they remembered it. Why go to that extreme? The best thing would be for them to leave now, while they could still walk. There were some who were soberer than others, so he had them help him form a group. He would take the girls home in his car. And to Molinari, who was still seated wiping his face with a napkin, he gave some strong coffee to drink. As he did that, Doctor Cruz had the precise movements of both a doctor, and a father.

"And now, everyone, let's leave quietly. Remember that people are sleeping. I'll take care of Molinari; let's go, girls."

On a tray he left a gratuity for the two men who had served the tables, and then they left quietly.

Emma looked at the starry sky with open eyes, as if her life depended on it, because when she closed them, the scene from earlier that night appeared again, and Emma was only a silent chatterbox. She had to keep looking at the starry sky with her eyes wide open. She had never seen so many stars, and she had never thought that the light of the sky would appear so stupid. The world began to feel like it was spinning and Emma had to close her eyes, but she immediately opened them again. At the moment she felt like

her feet were stuck to the ground, and her head was hanging in empty space like a bat. The sound of voices made her remember that she was not alone, and she returned to her upright position. No, she was not a bat; she was an animal in a herd. The liquid, starry sky was flowing down the side of all the souls in that herd; the sky was a common good, like an ordinary stream where all the animals in the herd drank at the same time. The group continued walking through the park. The silence with which they were moving reminded Emma of the scenes from a movie: with fugitives from justice, conspirators, smugglers, kidnappers, gangsters... Though still intoxicated, she remembered she was in a foreign country. "Oh my God!" She would not be able to say a single word in Spanish. In a foreign country... another way of living... dangers... "What if they..." No, no. She was in a different country, yes, but these shadows that were moving along with her were friendly shadows. Moving shadows, as shapeless as the trees, the ground, the dark houses, and the automobile that was waiting for them. Molinari was walking by her side. As they went down some steps, they leaned on each other like two blind people. Emma felt the hand of Molinari that touched her waist keep moving up over the back of her bare arm until it was almost in her armpit, next to her breast. In front of her she saw the girls and Doctor Cruz who, among the other shadows, seemed the most mysterious, like the shadow of an Indian who was attentive and helpful. He started the car and then the voices broke out again; only that now she was not able to understand them. She tried to ignore these friends who spoke a foreign language. Once in a while she felt like leaning back on the seat and going to sleep, but then she immediately sat up and kept looking at the deserted streets, because if she closed her eyes, it felt like she was floating on the waves of the sea, rising and falling, and in the darkness of her closed eyelids, violet colored mists were floating around her.

"Good night, Doctor Cruz. Good night, Miss Winthrop. Good night girls. So long, Molinari; I hope you get over being sloshed... ha, ha!" said those who were leaving.

The car door closed, and the motor started again. Emma didn't say anything. She was hardly able to smile in the darkness. More girls got out, and she was left behind, still feeling tipsy. Since there was more room, she stretched out a little. She realized that the body she was pressed against was that of Molinari who now was more active with his hands. Or with one hand, at least, which was distractedly rubbing her thigh. "Nice guy," Did she say that, or just think it? She smiled when she recalled the image of Molinari dancing awkwardly in the middle of the hall, blond like an Englishman, but talkative like an Italian. The image of Molinari dissolved, and Emma herself was dissolving in the night, as though all the matter that had coalesced forty years ago to give her life, was now floating in the air as it broke apart. Floating and scattering, like dust in the wind. Stuck to each corpuscle was a piece of her consciousness. She wasn't able to feel where her body ended. When she saw her own hand raised up next to the window, leaving its silhouette on the glass, she felt like it no longer belonged to her, that it was only part of the car window that looked out toward the murky early morning daylight. "Oh, Lord!" Molinari was humming a tango:

"Oh, Buenos Aires, Queen of the Plata; Buenos Aires, my dear Land..."

Thud! The car door closed again. "Good night Miss Winthrop." The motor started once more. Again, she saw the back of Doctor Cruz's head. And Molinari had begun to rub her thigh again. "Oh, brother!" A fresh wind was blowing, and now she really felt lousy. Doctor Cruz, had to take her by the arm and help her get out of the car...

“No, Molinari,” Doctor Cruz said. “You stay in the car. I’ll take Miss Winthrop and come back in a moment. Wait for me here. I’ll take her to her room.”

“Oh, you think I can’t walk?” Molinari stammered. “Ha, ha! Of course I can, Doctor Cruz, of course I can. He, he! Mishima, Mishima... You see how I can? Hic!”

The other two didn’t say anything. They climbed up the steps, twisting and turning.

“Mishima... Where’s my Mishima?”

“Be quiet!” Cruz told him.

“Be quiet!” Molinari muttered.

“Be quiet,” Emma said softly.

Fortunately, there wasn’t anyone who could hear them.

(But peeking through his partly open door, the hotel doorman saw them enter. He saw the North American woman wobbling like jelly, but he discretely stayed hidden and watched them as they climbed up the stairs.)

Fascinated, Emma fixed her eyes on the yellow glob of a lightbulb that was shaking in the wind, a light that seemed to conspire with the chimneys with the horrible voice of a witch. She recognized the patio; there, the previous night, the wind had caressed her naked body when she came out of the bath. Now she looked down on the patio, lying there between the neighboring rooftops. She stopped in front of the door and looked at it as though waiting for it to talk to her and move. Doctor Cruz took her purse and, after removing her key, he opened the door. Emma entered, followed by Molinari who was almost stuck to her. Molinari was quick to lie down. The yellowish light fluttering in the wind shone over Molinari sprawled out on the bed, as if he had just created it.

“Molinari; come on, Molinari,” Doctor Cruz scolded him sternly, “Come on, let’s go. Please, we must leave.”

Molinari got up reluctantly. If it was up to him, he would stay there, sleeping like a baby. Doctor Cruz turned on the bed lamp and took Molinari by the arm, leading him toward the door.

“Are you feeling okay, Miss Winthrop?” Doctor Cruz asked before he left. “Is there anything you need? No? Okay, get some rest then. We’re off now. Until tomorrow, Miss Winthrop.”

Ah, if she could only get rid of this drunkenness once and for all! She felt terrible, really terrible. If she could get some sleep it would be good. But how! She closed her eyes, and her eyeballs grew instantly, until they were as large as the world, and were full of dense, colorful smoke; she felt like she was falling into the vertigo of her eyes, spinning in enormous circles, from one star to another. She stretched out on the bed and looked at the ugly room where none of the furnishings were familiar, and none of them had any meaning. A hotel room that had been touched by other’s lives. Ugly, ugly. A wave of disgust, of scorn, and contempt for this South American country washed over her. How squalid everything was! None of the comforts of Boston. The floor with worn out boards; the bathroom in plain sight; the dirty walls without one painting, without one curtain. What do they do in this tasteless South American Country? And why had she come here?

She heard the footsteps of someone approaching her door.

The footsteps stopped and seemed to hesitate.

The floorboards creaked.

Then, the door handle began to rattle slowly, and she guessed it was Molinari.

So now this! This was the only thing lacking to make this ugly Hotel completely disgusting. He was a nice fellow, but what was he thinking? Emma was not afraid of men. But one thing was for sure: she didn't want them barging into her bedroom like this uninvited. She would invite Molinari, or not invite him, but it was her decision to make. "And certainly not tonight!"

The door was opening, slowly.

Emma sat up in bed with her head pressed between her hands.

"No, Molinari. You'd better go. Please go!"

She felt the bed sinking down under the weight of another person, and she raised her head indignantly. She saw a face that was leaning toward her.

"Get out of here, will you?"

The intruder pushed her until she laid down flat on the bed, and then got on top of her. Emma immediately recovered her complete awareness. She struggled, and said lots of things in English; many things. But without shouting, because she was not a child. The man had the vigor and the stubbornness of an intelligent animal. No, she was not a child, but this had never happened to her before. The rapidity and, especially, the silence of the man scared her to death. She felt mistreated and taken advantage of. For the first time in her life, and here in this miserable dump in Argentina, they were forcing her brutally, without love. The men who had been her lovers were civilized, and they said something. This animal was mute. She threatened in English. Feeling that everything was useless, and that the man had won, she was finally able to say something in Spanish:

"Digame algo!" (Say something to me!)

If he would just say something, even some lie, a single word that would sound like a man who cared about her.

"Digame algo!," she begged the brute.

Without a murmur, Doctor Cruz stopped, and then he rose up and left.

THE CLASS (La Clase)

A dining room in a middle-class house, in Buenos Aires. In the rear, in back of a large archway, was the vestibule and the stairs that lead up to the second floor. In the center of the room was a table covered with red velvet and illuminated by a chandelier with three lightbulbs. On one side, the Mother is knitting in a rocking chair. On the other side, the Son—seventeen years old—is studying, seated in front of a trestle desk while he is reading and taking notes. The sound of someone coming down the stairs is heard.

MOTHER

(Calmly, without looking up from her knitting.) There comes your father.

THE SON

(He closes the book quickly and picks up his notes, putting them in a chest, then he sits down at the table and rests his chin on his hand. The Father enters, grey-haired, pale, weak, and seeming to be exhausted. His eyes are red and look like they are staring, not because he is looking attentively, but because they move slowly. He walks over to his son and affectionately ruffles his hair.) Hi, Papa.

FATHER

How's it going?

MOTHER

(She looks up from her knitting.) Would you like to have a cup of coffee?

FATHER

No thanks. *(He sits down and stares at the floor, silently.)*

MOTHER

So, did you get some work done?

FATHER

Yes, a little.

MOTHER

You see? It's something worth doing.

FATHER

I suppose.

MOTHER

So what did you do?

FATHER

I corrected a few pages.

MOTHER

Very good. You'll see, everything's going to turn out just fine.

FATHER

That's easier said than done. It's something that takes a long time, and is *so* difficult. It seems like it's never going to end.

MOTHER

So why worry about it? The things you worry about never turn out well. Just go slow and keep on correcting.

FATHER

Sometimes I ask myself why I should keep on doing this.

MOTHER

What do you mean? It's what you really want.

FATHER

It's just that... I don't know... I want to continue, but I ask myself "What for?" Or, "For whom?" If I only had an incentive...

MOTHER

And don't you have one? Of course you do. Your work is going to be very important. Isn't it enough to think about that? Why do you need any other reason? Nobody could write what you are writing. Nobody could do it better than you.

FATHER

I don't know, I don't know... Sometimes I feel like I have got to finish the book, that I have to finish it no matter what happens. But I still don't know... I start writing and I feel like everything I say is okay. Later, when I go back and read it, I don't recognize what I have said. The words have fallen apart and are going up in smoke. I feel dizzy and confused. I struggle along. But I have to correct those flaws; I have to blow away all that smoke. Then I write it once more.

MOTHER

And that's what you need to do. You can't fool around. With things that delicate you can never play it by ear. What does it matter if it takes time? When everything is done you will see.

FATHER

Sometimes I think about all that is lacking, and I am afraid. Just imagine... It could be anything. A misfortune. Maybe something happens and you don't know what to do... And the work is still not finished... Just thinking about it makes me feel terrible.

MOTHER

So why do you think about it? Just don't think about it and your problem is solved. Think you are going to finish it. You *are* going to finish it, of course you are... One page today, another tomorrow... And when you least expect it...

FATHER

And you win the lottery... It's easy to say it! But it isn't one page today, and another tomorrow. It's the same page, doing it and undoing it, not going forward or backward.

MOTHER

It is a difficult job. It would be for anyone.

FATHER

Not so much. Or at least, it shouldn't be so difficult for me. It wasn't that way before. Twenty years of studying and teaching... The things I have in here (he pats his forehead). But they just don't come out the way I want. It's like I have gotten lost in some other person. "And is this me?," I ask. Yes, it is me. But lost inside someone else. A real nightmare I can't get out of. (*Silence. He stands up. His voice, which before was slow and shaky, now is excited, and he says some words so far apart that it almost sounds like he is stuttering.*) When I lost my manuscript..., I should have put a bullet in my head.

MOTHER

(Calmly.) My goodness! It wasn't that bad.

FATHER

What do you mean it wasn't? You think losing a whole manuscript is just a trifle?

MOTHER

No, it was terrible, I don't deny that. But what does it help to feel sorry about it for the rest of your life? Yes, it's gone, but the important thing is you're still alive and capable.

FATHER

Someone must have grabbed my briefcase then, but why didn't they return it?

MOTHER

I have already told you many times. When you passed out they took you off the train, and the briefcase was left behind. Someone must have stolen it.

FATHER

I offered a reward...

MOTHER

Yes, but that was much later. When you said you'd lost your briefcase, it was already too late. Probably the person who took your briefcase didn't bother to look through the newspapers to see if someone had reclaimed it. But even if he had looked for it in the Lost and Found, he would have done it in the next few days. He wasn't going to do it months later. He wasn't honorable. If he were, he would have turned it in to Lost and Found. It was obvious; it was a nice leather briefcase, still new, well cared for with the label, "Made in the USA." They stole it. Even if the thief read your claim some months later, do you think he would admit he had stolen it? Because if he had kept it all this time without returning it or giving it to Lost and Found, it would be obvious that he stole it... These things are done right away, or not at all. No, it was stolen.

FATHER

Yes, yes... But what did he do with the manuscript? Now, I am killing myself trying to rewrite the book, and the original manuscript, which was already finished, is rotting away in some hole where the rats are eating it.

MOTHER

Yes, but why would the thief want to keep the manuscript?

FATHER

Imbecile.

MOTHER

He would have thought, I will keep the briefcase but throw away the papers, because the owner will have another copy.

FATHER

That's the thing. I didn't have another copy. There I was, going around with the only copy... But who would have ever expected me to have another one so soon.

MOTHER

So now, there is nothing to be done. What's done is done, and I am sure that now you are writing your book even better than before.

FATHER

But I'm not the man I was before. (*Discouraged.*) Something tells me that I will never finish it. It's a big job. An enormous job. Nobody knows this better than I do. And to have to write this alone, with no incentive. Because, if at least I still had my classes...

MOTHER

But what more do you want? You have your pension. You can do whatever you want. You can relax now...

FATHER

Don't talk like that. Your tone infuriates me.

MOTHER

Okay... okay... I'm sorry.

FATHER

When I have students, that gives me the urge to write. I look at their faces, and it's as though I am seeing the face of my readers. While I teach classes I get new ideas, new perspectives. But now... For whom do I write?

MOTHER

When your book is published, you will see how they read it. You will have hundreds of readers.

FATHER

The students no longer come.

MOTHER

While you were recovering, many came; they asked about you. After that they visited you. But you know how it is; some go somewhere else; others have stopped studying... But Palanca always comes to visit you. In fact, she will come tomorrow. Isn't tomorrow Thursday? Yes. Every Thursday, without fail, you have your friend Palanca.

FATHER

Yeah, some visits those are! She sits there and talks about the weather, and the flies. And she looks at me and looks at me, and agrees with everything I say... It irritates me.

MOTHER

She is a very good-natured person.

FATHER

She may be, but she still irritates me. What does she think? That I am senile? She only talks about foolishness. If I talk to her of my interests, or what I am writing about, she just sits there and listens to me; she looks at me and then looks away, without saying a word...

MOTHER

She doesn't want to tire you out.

FATHER

As far as I am concerned, Palanca can just stay home. I don't need to have her visit me. She comes like she is visiting someone in the hospital. Even with a timetable. What I need is to return to my classes.

MOTHER

You can do that. Of course you can. If not in the University, in a high school. But you will return. One thing at a time. And here you have a lot to do. Your own son needs you as much as your students do. Next year he is going to enter college. He needs you. Just a moment ago, before you got back, he was telling me how he hoped you would help him. Son, don't you have something you wanted to ask your father?

SON

Yes, Mama.

FATHER

What is it?

SON

I have to write a paper. I have to hand it in the day after tomorrow.

FATHER

And you still haven't written it?

SON

No, Father.

FATHER

(He moves his chair closer, he puts his arm around his son's back, and he hugs him affectionately.) Ah, these young people today. They leave everything until the last minute. Some girlfriend, then?

SON

No, don't think that.

FATHER

Okay. So let's see. What is it you need? You don't have much time. The day after tomorrow... I suppose you have already studied what you are going to say.

SON

(While they are talking, the boy hardly looks at his father, and if he does, it is just a short glance.) I've been reading.

FATHER

Reading what?

SON

One of your articles.

FATHER

(With a feigned expression of surprise, both flattered and ironic at the same time.) Really? So the young boy is already reading things written by his father. Good, Good. And what article did you read?

SON

The one about the aesthetics of Benedetto Croce.

FATHER

About the aesthetics of Croce? So... Ah, yes... But that is an old one, really old! I no longer remember what I said about it.

MOTHER

He's been reading, and taking notes. But he says that he needs to ask you about some things.

FATHER

(Smiling, and pleased, but hoping to be even more flattered.) Why didn't you ask your teacher. He would be able to explain it better than I can, don't you think?

SON

Come on! Better than you? That's nonsense! You can't ask that teacher anything.

FATHER

Really?

SON

Yes, that's how it is.

MOTHER

The boy learns much more when you teach him. You have seen the good grades he gets, when you teach him. The last time, the class you taught—I no longer remember what the subject was—helped him get an A.

FATHER

Well, I'm very happy. You know, anything I can do to help you... But I didn't know that they would already be teaching you things like that in High School. Those things are more appropriate for the University. Aesthetics... The Aesthetics of Croce... What subject was your paper supposed to be based on?

SON

Logic. The teacher never told me to write about Croce. He only asked me to write a few pages concerning the language of science. But I thought it would be interesting to compare the language of science with that of poetry; and since you have written about that...

FATHER

The language of science and that of poetry! That is an interesting topic, a really interesting topic!

SON

Yes, the language of science and that of poetry! An interesting topic that I do not understand.

FATHER

That's only natural.

MOTHER

Why don't you help him? Who would be able to help him better than you?

FATHER

So do you want me to help you?

SON

Yes, Father.

FATHER

(Pleased, and with a vague feeling of gratitude, he gets up out of his chair. He takes a few steps toward the other end of the table.) It won't help to talk about my article. That was a long time ago. It would be better if I gave you some new ideas. For this, you can use what I am going to tell you. I will try to tell you what to write.

SON

Yes, Papa. *(He gets up to look for a pen and paper, and comes back and sits down, waiting attentively. The father has the appearance of a professor who is about to give a lecture, but after his first words, the ideas escape him, and he raises his hand to his forehead to see if his head is missing.)*

FATHER

Science and poetry...? Let me think. Well science uses symbols, and poetry uses symbols. But... ah, do you know what symbols are? Son symbols... but then I don't want to be too technical... From his experiences, man can abstract... Uh, just a minute. Up stairs I have some pages where I have written about this. I will go and get them so I can read them to you. Because when I try to speak about them like this...

MOTHER

Yes. This *is* a difficult topic.

FATHER

Just a moment. I'll be right back. *(Looking agitated, he leaves them to go and look for his papers.)*

SON

(Tossing his pencil on the table and muttering under his breath.) How long am I going to have to continue this charade, Mama?

MOTHER

(Knitting, without looking up.) But it makes him happy, son!

SON

Well it isn't easy. Having to seem like a fool, so he will be able to teach me some classes... I don't like to listen to him, or even look at him, when he tries to explain something to me. That red eye of his that gets so severe! And then I always have to ask him what else he knows about something.

MOTHER

Son, son; don't be cruel! He has gotten a lot better. That's the important thing. After his stroke he almost completely lost coherence. You remember; he wasn't able to speak. His tongue was like a limp rag. He had to give up his classes. He will never be the same. If it wasn't for that book he says he is writing, and for his conversations with you, I can't imagine...

SON

Yes, I know, I know. I understand. But don't you see? If he can't even finish one paragraph, do you think he doesn't realize that himself?

MOTHER

Yes, he realizes that his mind is not very clear; but he doesn't realize the painful effect it causes. He sees his ideas wrapped in a fog, but he still believes these ideas are worth something, that they are good ideas, although he can't express them clearly... *(They hear the noise of footsteps on the stairs.)* There he comes. *(The son picks up his pencil again, and once more looks like a student who is prepared to take notes.)*

A SAINT IN THE WEST INDIES

(Un Santo en las Indias)

A rough draft for an existentialistic drama

Act I

In an Indian reservation in Tucuman, in the spring of 1588, a friar is reading in his tent in the waning light of dusk. He is a frequent visitor of the Franciscan convents. A few days ago he arrived on foot from Lima, but neither his face nor his posture look normal because of the fatigue he is suffering after his long journey through hills and plains. Captain Don Diego approaches him.

DON DIEGO

You are going to wear your eyes out, trying to read like that.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Let them wear out, then. Why would I want to preserve them after I am rotting in the ground? So let them rot too... while I am using them to see.

DON DIEGO

Yes, go ahead and use them to see, but not those black letters lying there like they are dead. (*Looking at the book.*) How disgusting! It looks like a cemetery. If our eyes have to die, it should be while they look at something alive.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Something alive, alive? You think there's nothing alive in these books? For you, living is only moving your body. If that's all your life is, I don't envy you for it.

DON DIEGO

What other life am I going to live, if it is not mine?

FRAY FRANCISCO

It's a limited life.

DON DIEGO

But it's mine.

FRAY FRANCISCO

You are living because of the will of God. You left Extremadura because you heard talk about gold in Peru. Now, here you are in the middle of this misery, taking advantage of the misery of the Indians that you exploit.

DON DIEGO

Look who's talking! And what are you doing? You visit these convents. You think visiting convents—you call convents these pigsties of mud that crumble when it rains—is more important than what I do? I am alive, and I have filled the bellies of my Indians. And what do you do? You read and read... Bah!

FRAY FRANCISCO

These books show me a life that is better than the one I have found. I am living that other life, as well as this one, because when one imagines things, he is already living them. I am not a saint...

DON DIEGO

Ha, ha! Of course not, man. Of course not. You a saint? That's a laugh!

FRAY FRANCISCO

...no I'm not a saint. Nevertheless, I now am only reading books about saints, which has given me the desire to know exactly what sainthood is, so I can look at things like the true men of God.

DON DIEGO

These saints are not saints just because they look at things differently. It's because they behave well, that's all.

FRAY FRANCISCO

That's nothing. Behaving well... There are many people who behave well... and are not even good!

DON DIEGO

If they behave well, they are good. There is no way of getting around it. And the saints behave better than anyone. And because they behave better than anyone, they are given the gift of doing miracles.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Have you ever seen a miracle? I haven't. Never. And as for seeing something, no one has ever *seen* a miracle. Some have believed they saw a miracle, but that's another story. To see a miracle, it would be necessary that one happens somewhere. We see only what is in front of us, and a miracle is something that is not in any place; it's something that is only in our mind. There aren't any miraculous things, but it is miraculous that we believe we have seen a miracle in some things.

DON DIEGO

I hope God understands you, because as far as I am concerned... Is that the kind of thing you read in those books?

FRAY FRANCISCO

No. I don't know. But I'm telling you that doing good things is the least of it. The deep light in the mind of a saint is what I would like to discover. (*Pointing at the book.*) Here they tell us about the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. His battle against his own body, his selflessness before all other creatures, and his humility... But that isn't enough for me. (*He becomes excited.*) What does it matter to me that Saint Francis of Assisi gets rid of all his clothing, that he dresses in rags and eats with lepers on his journey? What I want to know is the hidden source of these actions. Why did he discover that it was necessary to take up poverty and discard self respect? Don't say that it was because he wanted to imitate Christ! Not an imitation, definitely not an imitation. Something of his own, is what he must have been. But what was it? What did he see in himself? Ah, if I could only get inside the soul of a saint! Because I too am capable of stumbling all over the earth, eating dry bread, and giving my clothes to the needy... Anyone can do that! But our body resists that, and lots of other things. You have also had that happen...

DON DIEGO

And who hasn't? Ever since we came to these lands we all have suffered. At times I think that nobody ever has suffered as much as the Spanish in the New World.

FRAY FRANCISCO

You see? That's what I was saying. It looks like we are in agreement. No one has suffered like you, like me, like all of the Spanish in the Indies, but that doesn't make us saints... Suffering doesn't make anyone a saint. I know very well what it is to suffer. Sufferings like those of an ascetic are what I have endured in this body. Nevertheless, in spite of my desire, I have never experienced the rapture of the mystics. When I look at myself, I see myself opaque. I don't even feel afraid... On the outside, I am capable of imitating the virtue of a saint, but I don't care about our exterior virtue, only the inner mystery that converts a human soul into an angelic soul. And I swear to you that I would gladly commit a sin, if that sin would reveal to me the mystery of sainthood.

DON DIEGO

You are crazy, man! Sin in order to become a saint? You're out of your mind.

Somewhere outside a hard blow is heard, then a muffled cry of pain and an Indian pursued by a soldier rushes into the tent. The Indian throws himself at the feet of the friar.

What's going on?

THE SOLDIER

He has been stealing.

DON DIEGO

(He raises the Indian by his hair.) I'll show you what we do with thieves. (He slaps him with the blade of his sword.)

FRAY FRANCISCO

No, no, no! *(He pushes Don Diego away.)* Here nobody beats anybody, or else we all beat each other. This tent of mine belongs to God.

DON DIEGO

(Surprised by his violence, he lowers his sword and he stares at the friar, who is still looking at him. Then, without ceasing to look at the friar, speaking very firmly he tells the soldier.) Cut off the hand that he used to steal.

The soldier strikes the Indian with his saber and forces him out of the tent. Fray Francisco grabs the soldier by the shoulder, spins him around, and gives him a hard blow on the chin.

FRAY FRANCISCO

It told you that here nobody beats anyone, unless we beat each other.

The soldier backs away and looks at the friar with astonishment; he looks at Don Diego, lowers his head, and then walks out of the tent.

DON DIEGO

(Furious, he rushes outside and shouts at the soldier.) Catch that Indian and cut of the hand he used to steal! *(He looks back threateningly at the friar.)* We'll talk later. *(After that he leaves.)*

FRAY FRANCISCO

Brutes, brutes!

He paces angrily, still feeling combative. Through the opening of the tent he looks out at the hills and the sky. Suddenly a light falls down from above. The friar steps back, enthralled, unable to believe his eyes. He prostrates himself, and whispers, "Oh, Lord!" Then, an old man dressed in white, with a white face, white eyes, and long white hair, appears in his tent.

OLD MAN

Get up. That's better. *(Smiling, he looks at Fray Francisco as if he is trying to figure him out.)* You want to be a saint, and yet you loose your patience and strike that soldier,

you get angry with your friend, and you feel like fighting... (*Mockingly.*) You certainly have a strange idea about sainthood. Are you sure it's sainthood you want?

FRAY FRANCISCO

Oh yes, Lord. I want to stop living, to forget about myself, to astonish myself, to leave an empty hole in this world so I can be reborn in the other world with a soul that is full of light like yours.

OLD MAN

Is that really what you want? Think about it. If you were a saint, you could no longer change. You would be a saint forever. Is that what you want?

FRAY FRANCISCO

(He throws himself at the feet of the apparition.) Oh, Lord!

When he looks up, no one is there. The friar starts praying. His face shines with an expression of mystical detachment. He is no longer interested in the world: only in his vision. But his ecstasy is interrupted when an Indian enters, almost fainting, dripping blood with his arm wrapped in a piece of cloth. He falls to the ground. The friar treats him with great kindness.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Oh, son! They've cut off your hand! But you have stolen, haven't you? God wants to test you, son. Oh, if I could only suffer for you! There was one who suffered for all of us, on the cross. Ah, but you can't understand me, poor fellow... (*He lifts his head and look into his eyes.*) Look; do what I do. (*He makes the sign of the cross.*) Go ahead and do it, my son. (*The Indian bends his mutilated arm with great pain.*) One hand is enough to cross yourself. We don't need both. Come on, let's cross ourselves together. I'll do it too with one hand, with only one hand like you. (*He picks up an axe, he lifts it and, with his arm stretched out over a trunk of wood, he cuts off his hand.*)

ACT II

Scene One

1595. A side street in Lima. The air is so delicate that everything sparkles with colors. Huddled against an adobe wall are several tight-lipped Indians. A female Indian comes by with an infant on her back. In the foreground are three Spanish soldiers.

SOLDIER 1

Here comes Fray Francisco.

SOLDIER 2

As always, looking gentle and humble.

SOLDIER 3

They say he cut off his hand in order to not get distracted and use the other one only to make the sign of the cross.

SOLDIER 1

They say he tried to stop the plague, like Saint George tried to stop the dragon, and he entered the infected area; and by kissing the sores of those who were sick he conquered the dragon that was sickening them from his swamp.

SOLDIER 2

They say that during the great drought he gave up his share of water, and one night he flagellated himself with so much vigor that he started weeping and his tears, like those of Saint Benedict, made it rain; then, after the corn germinated, the bread they made from it was the bread of his tears.

SOLDIER 3

They say he is a saint.

Fray Francisco passes by slowly, without looking at anyone. The huddled Indians also did not look at him.

SCENE TWO

1604. In the Archbishop's Palace in Lima. The Archbishop and the Inquisitor are chatting amicably.

ARCHBISHOP

I have received a lot of complaints, nothing more than complaints.

INQUISITOR

Because Fray Francisco is the bread of God, I put my hands in the fire for him.

ARCHBISHOP

I don't know, but don't worry about it. It has nothing to do with the Holy Office. And I asked you to come just to ask you a few questions.

INQUISITOR

About the earthquake?

ARCHBISHOP

Yes. The city is alarmed. More than alarmed; there is panic. Some Spanish people have flagellated themselves in public, or they have gone through the streets reciting prayers. With the slightest vibration of the ground, they fear that the earthquake is going to destroy Lima.

INQUISITOR

Exaggerations. After all, what did Fray Francisco say? Only that God would vent His anger on the evil Christians.

ARCHBISHOP

The people take that to mean that it refers to the rich; and it is a warning that, because of the rapacious behavior of the rich, an earthquake would destroy Lima.

INQUISITOR

Do you believe that...?

ARCHBISHOP

It is not a question of what I believe. Remember that fifteen years ago Fray Francisco predicted the earthquake that destroyed Trujillo. A group of respectable elders has come to see me. We have done all we could to calm things down, but it is necessary that Fray Francisco must go back on what he said.

INQUISITOR

Those filthy rich ought to feel guilty.

ARCHBISHOP

I'm glad that you're here. Just a moment. (*He goes to the door and gives an order to someone on the other side.*) Have Fray Francisco come in.

A moment later Fray Francisco enters. He is looking down absently, with the rosary in his only hand. He kisses the Archbishop's ring, and he greets the Inquisitor humbly.

ARCHBISHOP

They are complaining about us, dear Fray Francisco. They say we are fomenting great resentment of some people against others. For the love of God, we don't want create a scandal. Peace, peace, Fray Francisco.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Yes, peace...

INQUISITOR

Did you tell people that the Spanish were greedy and cruel, and that they have attracted the wrath of God?

FRAY FRANCISCO

(Looking absent.) I no longer say those things.

INQUISITOR

Did you talk about an earthquake and say that it would leave the city in ruins?

FRAY FRANCISCO

Oh, that was a long time ago. That was before...

INQUISITOR

You mean before the earthquake that destroyed Trujillo? *(Fray Francisco does not answer.)* It may be they have misunderstood you, Fray Francisco. *(To the Archbishop.)* Some things the Fray Francisco said in passing... Some figure of speech... You know how those natives are. Some resentful person started using the phrase and he did it with a different intention. And since everyone remembers vividly the earthquake in Trujillo, and they believe that Fray Francisco predicted it, we've got people terrorized.

ARCHBISHOP

Fray Francisco... *(Fray Francisco is still looking down.)* Fray Francisco! I'm talking to you!

FRAY FRANCISCO

Sorry.

ARCHBISHOP

Would you be willing to certify in writing, so that we can publish it, that you have not preached against any group of Spaniards, that you have not threatened anyone, and above all, that there is nothing definite about an earthquake?

FRAY FRANCISCO

As you like. *(He waves goodbye and leaves.)*

ARCHBISHOP

(Watching as he leaves.) He is a saint.

SCENE THREE

1610. *The Franciscan Monastery in Lima. Fray Francisco is dying on his rickety old bed. He is surrounded by other friars. Birds are flying outside the window.*

FRAY FRANCISCO

(He murmurs.) May God be praised!

FRIARS

Amen.

Entering quietly, but very excited, the Deacon comes in and softly announces the visit of several important people. He immediately bows, and beckons to those who are waiting to enter.

DEACON

The Lord Viceroy!

A show of respect. Government Officials enter, followed by other notables of Lima, and they silently approach the dying friar.

VICEROY

(He bows and takes the hand of Fray Francisco.) Pray for me.

FRAY FRANCISCO

I am a terrible sinner, but with the blessing of Jesus Christ I will go to Paradise. I promise that you will have a friend there. (*The sound of a bell is heard.*) The Credo! (*The birds outside the window flutter about and begin to sing.*)

DEACON

(*Kneeling, his voice choked with emotion.*) A miracle! A miracle! Listen, the birds are singing the Credo...

All the friars also begin to sing.

FRAY FRANCISCO

(*He raises the crucifix with his only hand and with his last breath says,*) Glory to God.

DEACON

Fray Francisco has passed away.

VICEROY

He was a saint.

ACT III

Light and nothing but light, like the center of a radiant cloud. Some very nice music is heard, and Fray Francisco appears.

FRAY FRANCISCO

(*Filled with joy.*) Heaven!

A VOICE

Heaven? Whatever you like. Others call it hell. It makes no difference. It is neither heaven nor hell.

Fray Francisco looks from one side to the other with alarm and sees, resplendent in light, the same old man who appeared in his tent more than twenty years ago.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Oh, Lord! (*He throws himself to his knees, and with a sigh of relief and joy he says:*) What a scare! It thought I heard...

OLD MAN

You heard correctly. This is neither heaven nor hell, although you can call it whatever you want. I am Satan.

FRAY FRANCISCO

(Standing up, frightened.) But I thought...

OLD MAN

You thought...? What did you think? Don't tell me you thought I was God... You cannot say that I deceived you. Did I tell you I was God?

FRAY FRANCISCO

No, but the way you look...

OLD MAN

It's your fault for thinking that I would have the feet of a he-goat, with horns and a tail.

FRAY FRANCISCO

But this place is so high...

OLD MAN

Ah, yes... You are one of those who, when you think of God, look toward the sky. Do you expect to see Him stuck to the ceiling like a fly?

FRAY FRANCISCO

But what about all this light?

OLD MAN

So it confuses you? It's because you have been taught the wrong thing. For you hell is flames, and heaven is light... And of course, when you see me surrounded by light... You are mistaken. I will explain. Hell and heaven are children's stories. As I told you, this is neither hell nor heaven. It is Life... No, no, that's not right. It isn't the Life that you were thinking... It isn't the Life that you have heard about... I'll try to explain this so you can understand it. This is... how can I say it?... this is what you people could call the Void.

FRAY FRANCISCO

The Void? You mean to say that which doesn't exist?

OLD MAN

Yes, it's that. Exactly. That which does not exist. That which for men does not exist. You see? It's not so difficult. It's like a coin; if you look at one side you don't see the other. But you can flip a coin over with your fingers as many times as you wish and, in succession, see the obverse and the reverse. But you can't do it with all this. You would need fingers like those of God, or mine, to make it flip over. Only with death does a man cease to see the obverse, and you only die once!

FRAY FRANCISCO

And now that I am dead, I am seeing the reverse, is that right?

OLD MAN

Okay, let's leave things that way. It's enough that you have understood this. I am not sure you would understand, if we were to keep on talking. After all, you have just died. You are on the move. You are traveling. You still remember your life. This is only the entrance to Life, or from the point of view of a man, to the Void. Once you are done traveling it won't make sense to talk about the obverse and the reverse. That is because in my kingdom there are no places that could be related or compared. The coins of your existence are minted with the metal from my kingdom. But now you will not see coins minted with two different sides. You are fused into the metal itself. And there will not be a "yes" or a "no," an "inside" or an "outside." But there is one thing I can tell you. If what you wanted was a perfect place, you will never find another one like this. Not even God has a place like this where He can rest. God lives together with men, in men, and outside men. Since He always follows the same paths where men walk, He doesn't have a palace of His own. But I do; this white light that you see is the total of all there is. You came from here, but while you live, you are not able to see it. Your own existence keeps you from seeing the light. While you live, you are a prisoner inside yourself.

FRAY FRANCISCO

I think I understand what you are saying. When I was a child I used to explore the inside of the cathedral, for hours and hours. Outside the sun was shining. I only saw the stonework, like tissues of silken threads; and the stained glass windows. It was a festival of colors: reds, blues, yellows, greens... Like being a prisoner inside a precious jewel...

OLD MAN

Now that the colorful glasswork of your existence has broken, you can see the white light that surrounds you. Now you can be at peace, the supreme peace of not living.

FRAY FRANCISCO

(After a moment of silence.) So then, this is the Void.

OLD MAN

(*Trying to hide his impatience.*) Yes, this is the Void, if that is what you want to keep calling it...

FRAY FRANCISCO

But if you rule the Void, what do you need servants for?

OLD MAN

To tell you the truth, it's not that I need them, it's that I don't want God to have them. God and I were equals. We were like the same person. That is, until you men appeared. I stayed the same as ever. However, God went down to live with you. Since then we can no longer coincide. God follows you in your projects, and as you change... Do you want to start a new kingdom in the world, with new creatures, and useful things? God will be there. Do you get up your hopes with the possibility of starting something different? God is there. I have to confess that so much disorder disgusts me. For that reason, I help men return to the place where they started, which you are seeing now. I try to see that you don't lose track of your existence. Whenever I can, I try to remove those who serve God. That afternoon when you struck the soldier, when you defied Don Diego and were about to mess up your life, I realized you were in danger. You were starting to develop a new avocation. I don't like that. These avocations disturb me. Like Father Las Casas. Have you heard about him? He was deceitful, violent, arrogant, argumentative, and disobedient; but he worshiped God. You were about to follow the same path. That was when I gave you what you wanted—sainthood—to keep God from living in you.

FRAY FRANCISCO

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

OLD MAN

But He didn't abandon you. You abandoned Him.

Fray Francisco

I did *not* abandon Him, you wicked Satan! It was a malicious trick of yours.

OLD MAN

I tricked you? But I don't have the power to do something like that... More power than God? No way. More success. Yes, that; more success. As for power, God can do more. And some gift *that* is! He has lots of willpower. He is always trying to make an experiment. And He often fails, you have to admit that. Adam was one experiment, and Eve another. And when the curiosity of Adam and Eve blossomed, I could no longer let it go. And Paradise was such a nice place! You were always close to home, just a step

away, you might say. But then Adam and Eve fell down to earth... And when they went, God went too. And families and people multiplied...

FRAY FRANCISCO

Then, so you were the serpent...

OLD MAN

There may have been a serpent there, but it wasn't me. I abhor serpents; they are stuck to the earth. I abhor everything that is stuck to the earth. No, I had nothing to do with the fall of Adam and Eve. And of course that experiment didn't work; because men kept on having little curiosity for the original sin. I already told you; the experiments of God never produce good results. I am not ambitious, and I never try to do anything. But I wait for the failures of God that rise up like a glorious cloud of smoke. Every once in a while I go down to the earth and set free some lost lamb that has gotten tangled up in the thorny experiments of God. That's what happened to you. You were about ready to start a foolish battle, and who knows what the outcome would have been.

FRAY FRANCISCO

Why didn't you just leave me alone; why didn't you let me be?

OLD MAN

You wanted to be a saint, remember? You wanted to stop being a man, to forget about your self, to be enthralled, to be light, to live, not just exist, remember?

FRAY FRANCISCO

Yes, but I wanted to go to heaven...

OLD MAN

I already told you that there is no heaven. What there is, is this. You see: it is very close to what you wanted. Why don't you call it heaven? It's just a matter of words. What is bothering you is that I am Satan, isn't that it? As for everything else, it's just what you wanted. You're not going to say now that what you wanted was to serve God. The servants of God do not achieve immortality. They waste their souls. Your soul is intact, so don't complain. If God had been living in your soul, He would have burned it; the souls that have no combustion are preserved, and the wind sends them to me. My kingdom has the perfection of a sphere. It is the absolute. Here everything is identical to itself. Your soul is equal to all the other souls. God, on the other hand, wants each life to move through time, to change, and be different.

FRAY FRANCISCO

There's something really wrong here. There must have been a terrible mistake. I was different! In life they loved me; now I am dead, and perhaps they canonized me...

OLD MAN

Yes, people like you, that is, those who want to come to my kingdom. They remind you of those who also want to become part of the absolute. Those who duck out of their responsibility, who are doubtful, evasive, and fond of generalities... What did you do when you were alive? You scorned the world, you preached resignation, you were indifferent about adventures, you were against fighting, you gave up being a man... What you really wanted was to die. Deciding to cut off your hand, exposing yourself to the risk of contracting the plague, the abstinence you inflicted on your body, they were all ways of adapting yourself to death. Yes, my friend, you were always negative.

FRAY FRANCISCO

How can you say that I was negative? My life was full of devotion and piety.

OLD MAN

Are you trying to say that your life was full? You are very modest; you don't know how to appreciate your own merits. You were a hollow man, and you can be proud of it. I admire hollow men. You were hollow like the barrel of an arquebus. Because of that, the arquebus is becoming the symbol of man.. Hollow men take the hollow arquebus, and—bang, bang—they make hollows in the body. Ha, ha! Isn't that funny?

FRAY FRANCISCO

I have not been a man of war, you know that very well.

OLD MAN

You have another type of hollowness; just look at that habit. A perfect protection, like military armor. The more signs, masks, chains, and distinctive followers you have, the more hollow you are. That's what a cannon does, no? It takes a hole and wraps it up... There are those who want to stuff themselves and let strange emotions grow inside them; but overloading the soul creates an ugliness, like the plaque on your teeth, like the moss in irrigation ditches, like the mud in aqueducts, and the soot in chimneys. The men who want to be original and different are covered with muck. It is God who does this and makes them useless for me; I can no longer use them like a flute, to play my diabolical melody. They need a purgative. That is where Inquisitions come in. That is one of the admirable things about your people. Just look at the effort that Spain has made to cleanse its pipes! It leaves men empty. And when they open their mouths, loud empty voices resound. These voices, so common and so abstract, end up here because they are volatile.

Fitting one abstraction within another, men find a way to escape their world and travel around through... the Void. Just take an example. Think about a place you want to live. Everything you think about will be subordinated to another: the individual to the species, the species to the genus... You will finally reach a greater cohesion that is more clear, more quiet, and more permanent... That, of course, means me. These empty ideas that get fitted together, one inside the other, grow and then vanish. Imagine a dove that wants to be larger than the wind and begins to grow and grow; to grow until it is so large that there is no place in the world where it can perch. The dove that, before, would fit in the hands of a child, would grow to be so immense that it could only fit in mine. My enemies are those who are insubordinate and rebellious. For them everything is a problem, a conflict, a nuance; for them everything is involved in the history of man on earth. They live, and they see themselves live. They become dense and tight inside. They weigh too much. My friends are those who are open so I can blow through them.

FRAY FRANCISCO

(He gets up angrily.) Give me back my life!

OLD MAN

Give you back your life? But, my dear man, I can't do that. I already told you that there is nothing I can do. Only pull the strings and raise the puppets for the decoration of my kingdom. God would like to cut the strings and keep the puppets, so he could give them life. But he seldom is able to do that. I am a puppeteer with very strong strings. *(Fray Francisco buries his head in his hands.)* Come on! What's the matter with you? These things happen to us. You are a saint, isn't that what you wanted? Anyway, now I must leave you. Go ahead. You can now be at home.

END OF PART III